YUU MIYAZAKI
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THE ASTERISK WAR
03. THE PHOENIX WAR DANCE

YUU
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ILLUSTRATION BY
okiura

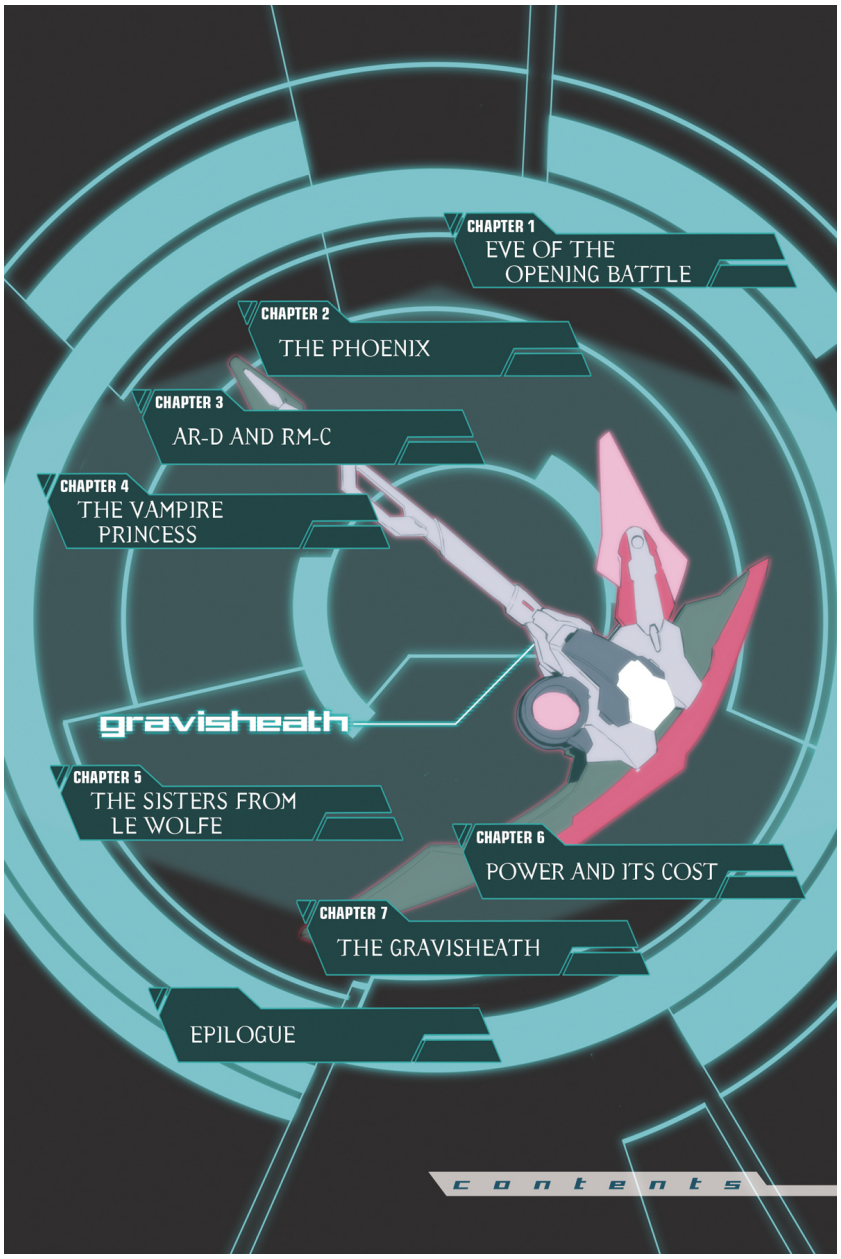
THE ASTERISK WAR

03. THE PHOENIX WAR DANCE

IRENE URZAIZ
Irene Urzaiz
"THE ORDER DIRK GAVE ME... WAS TO CRUSH YOU, AYATO AMAGIRI."
Priscilla Urzaiz
PRISCILLA URZAIZ
"I'M SO SORRY MY BIG SISTER'S CAUSING YOU TROUBLE!"

"HUH...?"
THE DOOR OPENED, SO OF COURSE AYATO AND JULIS WALKED IN. THEY FROZE IN TANDEM.
"FINALLY." SAYA CALLED UP THE AIR CONSOLE AND PROMPTLY UNLOCKED THE ROOM.

"Blossom—
Rafflesia!"
"THIS IS THE HOTTEST OF ALL MY TRAPS. I HOPE YOU ENJOY IT!"
"AW, HELL!"
IRENE STARTED TO RUN— BUT TOO LATE.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THE ASTERISK WAR

03. THE PHOENIX WAR DANCE

YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 3
YUU MIYAZAKI

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Cover art by okiura

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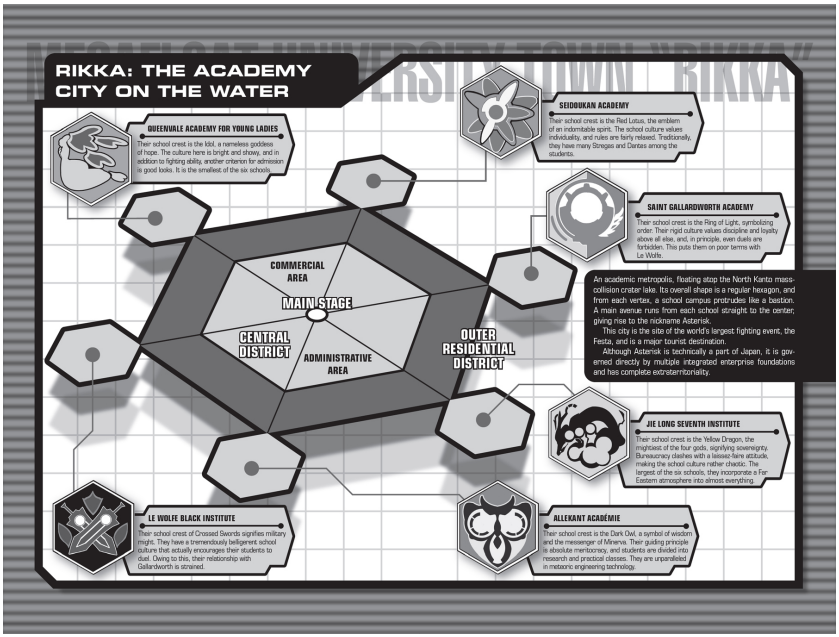
RIKKA: THE ACADEMY CITY ON THE WATER
QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES
Their school crest is the Idol, a nameless goddess of hope. The culture here is bright and showy, and in addition to fighting ability, another criterion for admission is good looks. It is the smallest of the six schools.
SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY
Their school crest is the Red Lotus, the emblem of an indomitable spirit. The school culture values individuality, and rules are fairly relaxed. Traditionally, they have many Stregas and Dantas among the students.
SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY
Their school crest is the Ring of Light, symbolizing order. Their rigid culture values discipline and loyalty above all else, and, in principle, even duels are forbidden. This puts them on poor terms with Le Wolfe.
COMMERCIAL AREA
MAIN STAGE
CENTRAL DISTRICT
ADMINISTRATIVE AREA
OUTER RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
An academic metropolis, floating atop the North Kanto mass-collision crater lake. Its overall shape is a regular hexagon, and from each vertex, a school campus protrudes like a bastion. A main avenue runs from each school straight to the center, giving rise to the nickname Asterisk.
This city is the site of the world's largest fighting event, the Festa, and is a major tourist destination.
Although Asterisk is technically a part of Japan, it is governed directly by multiple integrated enterprise foundations and has complete extraterritoriality.
JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE
Their school crest is the Yellow Dragon, the mightiest of the four gods, signifying sovereignty. Bureaucracy clashes with a laissez-faire attitude, making the school culture rather chaotic. The largest of the six schools, they incorporate a Far Eastern atmosphere into almost everything.
LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE
Their school crest of Crossed Swords signifies military might. They have a tremendously belligerent school culture that actually encourages their students to duel. Owing to this, their relationship with Gallardworth is strained.
ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE
Their school crest is the Dark Owl, a symbol of wisdom and the messenger of Minerva. Their guiding principle is absolute meritocracy, and students are divided into research and practical classes. They are unparalleled in meteoric engineering technology.

CHAPTER 1
EVE OF THE OPENING BATTLE

"Um, you're Ayato Amagiri, the Murakumo, aren't you?"

A chestnut-haired girl approached Ayato as he was eating lunch in the Hokuto dining hall. She had a broad smile and a lively look.

"…Huh?"

"Can I get your autograph?" she asked, thrusting a pen and a card at him.

"Oh. Sure, I guess so."

Her forwardness caught him off guard, but he signed the card. Of course, he had no special stylized signature, so he settled for neatly printing his name. These requests had bewildered him at first, but he was beginning to get used to it.

"Oh, thank you so much! Good luck with the Phoenix! I'm rooting for you!" The girl walked away with the autograph, waving broadly.

Ayato chuckled awkwardly and forced himself to smile until she left—then whirled around at a cold feeling behind him.

Julis and Saya stared sternly across the table at him.

"Um… Is something wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," Julis said. "I was just thinking how hard all that popularity must be on you."

"You're too friendly, Ayato," Saya added. "I worry sometimes."

"Y-you think so…?"

The weight of their disapproval was bearing down heavily on him. Ayato awkwardly rubbed his head.

A week had passed since Ayato had won his duel against Kirin to become the top-ranked fighter at Seidoukan Academy. Requests

like these were quite common now—not to mention letters and gifts from fans, interviews with the media, all sorts of offers from corporations, and even anonymous threats and harassment. It seemed like anything was permitted.

Fortunately for him, the school had its own department to handle these things, and he had left everything to them. But when people like the girl from before reached out to him directly, he had no choice but to deal with it.

"Come on, you two. No need to get so upset at every little thing. An unlisted unknown rose to the top out of nowhere, after all. Of course he's gonna get some attention," Eishirou said with a lackadaisical grin and slurped up his soba noodles.

There was almost no precedent in the history of Seidoukan Academy of an unlisted fighter taking top rank. The rules for official matches made it all but impossible.

For the monthly standoffs, students were separated into three tiers. The first tier consisted of the highest ranks, otherwise known as Page One; the second of lower-ranked fighters, dubbed the Named Cult; and at the bottom of the heap were the unranked—the "unlisted."

Although a ranked combatant was not permitted to refuse a challenge from a lower-ranked one, fighters could only challenge up to one tier above. In other words, to challenge a Page One, being in the Named Cult was a prerequisite. The only way for an unlisted to leap to Page One was by winning in an ordinary duel. Those at the top, however, tended to be the most cautious about engaging in duels. This was only natural, considering how much they had to lose.

"That's true," Kirin said, agreeing with Eishirou. "I was lucky to jump up to Page One by winning a duel myself—and even then I only took eleventh place. Maybe it sounds odd for me to say, but Ayato shooting all the way to first place is much more dramatic."

She sat next to Saya, slurping up udon noodles. Kirin had been the reigning champion until just a week ago, but she did not miss her title in the least.

In Seidoukan's ranking system, the winner and loser switched standings, making Kirin now unlisted. But she was in the so-called "grace period," a provision designed to soften the blow of dropping suddenly in the rankings. During the grace period, students were guaranteed the same privileges that their prior rank had afforded

them. In addition, in the first official match following their loss, they were allowed to challenge any student below their former rank.

"As I recall, Princess, there was a similar fuss when you made Page One," Eishirou teased.

"Perhaps, but this sort of thing is temporary," replied Julis in all seriousness. "It didn't last nearly as long for me."

"Well, sure. You gave the royal cold shoulder to absolutely everyone. Of course things cooled off fast."

"Unfortunately for them, it just isn't in me to indulge that kind of behavior. I'm happy people support me, but I have no interest in letting others use me for their own gain. Personally, I think refusing all the attention was the most honest way to handle it. See?" Julis took out her mobile device to open an air-window.

"A Net auction…? Wh—Hey!" Ayato exclaimed at the rows of all his autographs. He wasn't sure how to feel about the exorbitant price tags.

For a moneymaking scheme, it wasn't particularly sophisticated—but still, it came as a bit of a shock.

"That's a pretty popular way for students to make a quick buck. Happens all the time," Eishirou said from behind Ayato, consoling him with a pat on the shoulder.

"Yeah, don't mind them," Saya added. "You have fans who are cheering you on, for real. Like me."

"Th-that's right!" Kirin chimed in. "You have some supporters in my class. And me, too…"

Julis grinned boldly. "Hmm. You say that now, but what if you get matched against us in the Phoenix?"

"Oh yeah! You two got registered, right?" Ayato said.

Kirin had agreed to Saya's suggestion that they sign up together as a reserve for the Phoenix, which had come as a surprise to Ayato. Regardless, another team had withdrawn from the competition yesterday, and now they were officially enrolled.

"…Obviously, we'll give it all we've got," Saya replied.

"Yes. My feelings exactly," Kirin said. "The Phoenix is a different matter altogether."

The pair responded with piercing eye contact.

Julis chuckled. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"To be honest, though, I'd rather not have to fight you two," Ayato remarked.

Ayato and Julis had been training almost daily for the tag matches with Saya and Kirin. Their record was only about half and half during their regulated scrimmages.

Saya and Kirin were so well synced with each other that it was hard to believe they had only just recently teamed up. They would make formidable opponents in the tournament.

“You all seem to be in high spirits. That’s good,” Claudia said with a soft laugh, smiling serenely as ever.

“We haven’t seen you in days, Claudia,” Julis said. “You must be terribly busy.”

“Oh, yes. The work for the Festa just keeps piling up.” Claudia opened an enormous air-window above the table. “But the bracket for the Phoenix was just announced, and I thought I would come let you know.”

All eyes turned to the display. Lines extended from the throng of names to form a towering bracket resembling a giant castle.

“Whoa… That’s a ton of people,” Ayato said.

There were 512 contestants, or 256 teams, registered for the Phoenix. Ayato knew the numbers, but the mass of names before his eyes was intimidating.

“Um, let’s see, we’re… Oh, there we are! Block L!” Kirin said.

“Hmm, and we are…Block C,” Julis said. “It looks like we won’t have to square off until the main tournament.”

The two shared a relieved smile.

The Phoenix was held over roughly two weeks. The first half, popularly known as the preliminary rounds, decided the top thirty-two teams. These rounds formed the massive bracket in front of Ayato and his friends. Later, a lottery would sort those thirty-two pairs into a new bracket. This latter half was considered the main tournament, where the competitors could earn points for their respective schools.

“Did you really come here just to show us this, Claudia?” Ayato wondered.

Claudia had just mentioned she was quite busy. While it was true that the announcement of the Festa bracket did not occur at a predetermined date and time, Ayato and his friends would have seen it soon enough. There was no need for her to deliver the information personally.

“Well, you are among the favorites, after all,” she replied. “I wanted you to have every possible moment to prepare.”

“Favorites? Oh, we can’t really be…” Ayato flailed in denial.

Exasperated, Eishirou flicked him in the middle of the forehead. “You doofus. One of these teams has the current top-ranked student, and the other’s got the former number one. How could you be anything but?”

“I agree. Ayato and Miss Toudou are too modest, I think. You could stand to have a little more confidence. You represent our school, after all.”

“Uh, okay…”

“We’ll try, but…”

Ayato and Kirin slumped and stared at the floor.

“There aren’t many standouts in this tournament. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if one of you really did win.” Eishirou spoke nonchalantly enough, but he was not the sort to dole out flattery lightly. “The field doesn’t appear to have any surprises. No big shots out of nowhere or anything.”

Of course, none of the schools announced their Festa contestants ahead of time. But information had a way of getting around, and much of the roster would end up matching public expectations.

“And luckily for you, unlike the last Gryps or the Lindvolus, there are no glaringly invincible names,” Claudia said.

“Invincible?” Ayato cocked his head.

“She probably means the Silverwinged Knights from Gallardworth for the Gryps, and the Witch of Solitary Venom from Le Wolfe for the Lindvolus.” Julis shrugged disinterestedly.

“Indeed,” Claudia went on, “those contestants won their respective Festa events by an overwhelming margin, even more than their reputations suggested. For this event, however, things seem to be just the opposite—anything could happen. Well, I suppose the Page One fighters from each school do have better odds…”

“Apparently the pair that won the last Phoenix graduated,” Eishirou said. “They aren’t in it this year. And I hear that the Jie Long team that came in second has their sights set on the Gryps.”

The depth and breadth of their knowledge was impressive. As Ayato listened with rapt attention, Claudia clapped her hands together and looked around the table.

“Regardless, I cannot overstate the strategic importance of this Phoenix tournament for the current season. It’s no exaggeration to

say that the success of our school rests on your shoulders. I'm counting on you all."

Among the six schools of Asterisk, several excelled in Festa events. St. Gallardworth was superior in the team battle Gryps, the Le Wolfe Black Institute fared well in the one-on-one format of the Lindvolus, and Seidoukan Academy shone in the tag team battles of the Phoenix. These trends were obvious from each school's track record in its respective event.

For Seidoukan, doing well in the Phoenix was a prerequisite for placing high overall.

Jie Long Seventh Institute was strong in a variety of events, lacking a particular forte but maintaining high scores in each competition. The performance of Allekant Académie was highly variable, with their favored tournament changing from season to season, whereas the Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies consistently failed to do well in any tournament.

"I have a question." Saya, who had been quietly sipping orange juice through a straw, sharply raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Sasamiya?" Naturally, Claudia responded like a teacher to Saya's very student-like query.

"Who are the favorites from the other schools?"

"That is a good question. Although, Miss Sasamiya, am I correct in assuming that you're only interested in the two ladies from Allekant?"

Saya's eyebrow twitched slightly. She seemed eager to settle the score with Camilla, the Allekant student who had visited Seidoukan earlier.

"Those two are…here. Block H." Julis quickly spotted their names in the bracket. Their placement meant that neither Ayato's team nor Saya's would face them until the main tournament.

"Regarding those two, there should be an announcement from the tournament Executive Committee," Claudia said." There's nothing I can tell you myself."

"Oh?" Eishirou's eyes lit up at this cryptic remark. "Does that mean they're another exception?"

Claudia only giggled in response.

"'Another'?" Ayato found Eishirou's wording curious.

"The committee is always changing the Festa regulations, or making and deleting exceptions to the rules," Eishirou happily explained. "They say they're trying new things, you know, but

they're just inconsistent. It's unheard of for research students to participate in the Festa, so there must be some—"

"The Executive Committee's top priority is to make the Festa as entertaining as possible," Claudia interrupted. "To that end, they will try all sorts of new things, and stop doing anything they consider unprofitable. That's all there is to it."

That brought the subject to a close.

"Hmph," Saya grunted, clearly dissatisfied, but did not pursue the matter. That was that, clearly.

"Um, then, do you have any information on other popular contestants…?" Kirin asked.

"Oh, I do, Miss Toudou. Please give me a moment." With a kind smile, Claudia entered something in her mobile device, and a moment later the others received a message. "I just sent you the relevant data. I hope it helps in your preparations."

"Wow, this *will* help," Ayato said.

He'd immediately opened the files to find information on dozens of students, complete with photos. Included were their physical traits like height and weight, as well as their records, weapons of choice and, where applicable, Orga Luxes and special abilities. There were even some video recordings of past duels.

"Oh, this is nothing. This is standard procedure for all the schools. I'm sure the others are poring over your data as we speak."

"Yup! They say that reliable and thorough data reflects the intelligence-gathering of each school," Eishirou chimed in playfully, although he was the only one present who had not received the files.

"Oh, I remember my uncle saying that Le Wolfe and Queenvale were especially good at this sort of thing," Kirin said.

"Well, we just have to be ready," Julis said as she browsed the data. She suddenly stopped on one entry and sighed. "…Ugh, I should have known. She'll be trouble."

"Trouble?" Ayato walked behind Julis and peeked at the air-window by her hand.

"This girl uses the Orga Lux Gravisheath," she explained. "I don't know what Allekant has up their sleeve, but aside from them, the most dangerous contestant in this tournament is probably *her*."

"Her name is…Irene Urzaiz," Ayato read, by the picture of a female student with a razor's edge glare and a dauntless smile.

*

The central school building of the Le Wolfe Black Institute could be most succinctly described with the word *fortress*. It was rough and imposing, an enormous mass of metal built to project power and oppressive might.

Contrary to popular opinion, there was no sense of lawless degeneracy here. Because it was often seen as the polar opposite of St. Gallardworth, the school of discipline and order—and perhaps also because of the delinquent students and the redevelopment area they used as their base—many thought of Le Wolfe as some terribly dilapidated place. The actual situation was somewhat different.

It was true that rules were all but nonexistent in Le Wolfe, and that outsiders called it a den of mavericks. There was one imperative here, however, which always stood true: absolute submission to the strong.

In LeWolfe, power was everything, and victory was respected above all else. This value system served to temper the actions of the students. A total lack of inhibitions risked drawing the ire of someone stronger.

Another common stereotype was that LeWolfe students were all no better than a pack of violent and dangerous animals.

That, too, was a grave misunderstanding. Such a statement described only some eighty or ninety percent of the student body. Even the most conservative estimate suggested that at least ten percent of Le Wolfe aspired to complete their studies responsibly.

Korona Kashimaru, who was among that ten percent, often had the urge to shout as much at the top of her lungs. All the time, in fact, but she had never once acted on it.

“The hell are you doing, Korona? Catch up.”

“Oh, s-sorry! Coming!”

She hurriedly trotted up to the male student walking ahead of her.

The boy who had scolded her was Dirk Eberwein, the first non-Genestella in the history of the Le Wolfe Black Institute to reach the rank of student council president.

There was a tendency to cast fighters from Le Wolfe as the bad guys in the Festa, so they were not well-liked; but the most hated, the most utterly despised student at the entire Institute was none

other than Dirk.

Without ever dirtying his hands, he manipulated others like pieces on a chess board to advance his plots from the shadows—or such was his reputation, which could not be any nastier. More evidence of his unpopularity lay in how other students had labeled him the Devious King, although he was not even a ranked fighter.

Still, Korona did not think that Dirk was such a terrible person.

It was true that he had a foul mouth and a worse attitude. He was perpetually in a bad mood, and she had never seen him let the corners of his mouth soften, let alone smile. Still, Korona was indebted to him. If he was the kind of person everyone said he was, would he have bothered to take her on as his secretary? She, a talentless, airheaded girl who had entered Le Wolfe purely due to a mix-up?

Without Dirk's protection, a helpless student like her would have wound up long ago in the lowest caste of the school, destined for nothing but exploitation.

I can't say he's a good person, based on the things he does. Still, I don't think he's as bad as everyone says he is…

Perhaps aware of Korona's thoughts, or perhaps not, somehow Dirk walked through the dank, dreary hallway without a word. They were in a high-security area where ordinary students were not allowed to enter.

Huh? Wait, this is the way to—

The color drained from her face.

"Um, Mr. President…? Are we going…to the…?"

"*What?* We're going to the penalty rooms, obviously."

"We really *are*?!"

The penalty rooms were a dungeon-like space where students were punished for their extreme transgressions. It housed a collection of the worst and most violent students of Le Wolfe, where an unremarkable citizen like Korona had no reason to set foot—and she would be quite happy to keep it that way.

But Dirk passed through one security measure after another into the inner sanctum. On either side of the narrow passageway were thick walls, as if to separate rooms, but there were solely number plates with no visible doors. At the entrance, a guard had offered to accompany them only to receive a peevish refusal from Dirk. Korona had never been so frightened.

Yells and jeers and banging on walls clamoring through the

passageway just added to her apprehension. A squeaky whimper escaped her.

Dirk was shorter than she was, and Korona did her best to hide behind him as she followed. Despite being a Genestella, she was terrified, but Dirk, an ordinary human, did not seem bothered in the least.

Finally, he stopped at a certain room.

He raised his hand to the marker to bring up a console. After he punched in a pass code, the wall facing the passageway faded, then disappeared. Since the number plate itself remained suspended in midair, Korona gathered that the wall was still there, but some mechanism had made it transparent.

"Hey, you crazy broad. You alive in there?"

When Dirk called into the space, some sixty square feet, Korona could sense movement. The room had no light, and she could only vaguely see what was inside, but she made out a figure sitting against the far wall.

"I was wondering who'd visit me, and it's *you*? What the hell brought you all the way down here?" The manner of speech was as uncouth as Dirk's, but the voice was higher in pitch—a female student.

Straining her eyes, Korona was finally able to make out the figure in the dungeon.

Her hands chained to the wall, she sat in her uniform with her legs unabashedly open. She wore a long scarf wrapped around her neck, although it was summer, and the lack of a shirt beneath her jacket completed the mismatched look.

While Korona stared curiously at the girl's unusual attire, she received a sharp glare from angular, wolfish eyes. Intimidated, she fell back a step.

"I've got a little favor to ask you," Dirk said.

"Ha!" the girl scoffed loudly. "A favor? An order, you mean. If you tell me to do something I can't exactly refuse."

"If you'll do it, I can let you out right now."

"Hold up, you didn't even bring me anything? I'm starvin' to death over here. Although, maybe that little girl right there would do."

"Eep!" Korona ran behind Dirk and made herself even smaller.

"Well? You wanna take the offer or not?" Dirk asked, ignoring the other student's jeer.

“Yeah, fine… So? What d’you want me to do?”

“It’s nothing much. I want you to crush a Seidoukan brat. Make it so he never fights again. A duel would work fine, but the Phoenix happens to be coming up. You’ll fight him there. Korona, you took care of her registration?”

“Huh? Oh—Yes!” The sudden attention startled her, but she nodded emphatically.

She remembered filling out some registration paperwork at Dirk’s request earlier. Now she understood what it was for. It had never crossed her mind that he hadn’t spoken to the contestant first.

“You want me to fight in the Phoenix?”

“He could decline a duel, but not a Festa match,” Dirk said, then leaned in. “You should be able to get to the main tournament easily. He should, too. You’ll match up against each other sooner or later. Crush him. *You don’t need to win.*” The last sentence resonated like a voice from the depths of an abyss.

A chill ran down Korona’s spine.

“…But, hey, if you can win it all, then go ahead and do that, too.”

“You say it like it’s so damn easy,” the girl complained, but her shoulders shook with laughter. It made her chains jangle. “I got a few questions, though.”

“Shoot.”

“First off. If you’re after this kid, why not use the Cats? Why’d you come to me?”

“Because you’re the best choice for the Festa. Besides, the Cats are busy—both Silver Eyes and Gold Eyes. And using them would cost me.”

“Is that it?”

“The guy’s also number one at Seidoukan. If I use the Cats and they trace it back to me, there might be trouble. I want something as close to legitimate as possible for this job.”

The girl cackled. “Seidoukan’s top ranked? Are you shitting me? *That*’s who you want me to fight?”

“Would I ask you if I didn’t think you could pull it off?”

The girl bowed her head quietly in thought, then raised it again. “Okay, second question. Why are you after this kid?”

The question caught Dirk off guard, or so his tongue click

suggested. He had a habit of making the sound when he was annoyed. “I’m not obligated to tell you that… Whatever. You ever heard of the Ser Veresta?”

“Huh? What the hell’s that?”

“Seidoukan’s Orga Lux. He isn’t using it to its full potential yet, but if I leave him alone he could cause problems later. That’s why I want to crush him now.”

“Heh—an Orga Lux, huh? Must be some weapon if *you’re* afraid of it.”

“…Anyone who saw that thing firsthand would be,” Dirk spat under his breath. He seemed to be convincing himself rather than the girl.

“Fine. Last question—Well, more like I wanna double-check.” She fixed a penetrating gaze on him. “You haven’t let anyone touch her, have you?”

“’Course not. I always honor my contracts, you know that.” Dirk nodded, completely unaffected. Korona, on the other hand, wanted to flinch just standing near the intense exchange.

Dirk and the detainee stared each other down until the latter turned away.

“Well, it’s no fun being stuck in a place like this just for making a little scene at a casino. I’ll take the job, Dirk Eberwein.”

“Took you long enough, Urzaiz,” Dirk grumbled, looking bored, then entered another sequence into the optical keyboard.

The chains released with a clang, and Irene stood up and let out a good yawn. “Ahh… Finally,” she murmured, loudly cracking her shoulders.

She was quite tall, and her lithe and well-proportioned body called to mind a carnivorous animal.

“Now, first things first. I gotta get me something to eat.” Irene’s devilish grin revealed two long, sharp fangs.

CHAPTER 2
THE PHOENIX

The main arena in the central district of Asterisk was known as the Sirius Dome.

The opening ceremonies for the twenty-fifth Festa season were already underway at the Dome, one of the eleven large-and medium-sized arenas that hosted the event.

Ayato had once seen the building from the front when Julis had shown him around, but this was his first time setting foot inside.

The stage in the Sirius Dome was so large that it could hold all of the Festa's contestants and still have room left over. The actual fights would be restricted to a smaller area, but for the opening ceremonies, the organizers were making full use of its size. The contestants were lined up, organized by school, with some spaces for absentees. This was especially apparent for Le Wolfe. Gallardworth, in stark contrast, had no gaps in their formation.

"Wow, this is a ton of people."

Ayato had not quite meant to say that aloud, but Julis heard and answered with a mischievous smile. "Are you talking about the competition?" She indicated their surroundings. "…Or the crowd?"

The spectators were packed around the stage, every possible seat filled.

"Both, I guess," Ayato said with a nervous laugh.

He had been told that the arena could host one hundred thousand people, but seeing it for himself was something else. He looked up at the towering decks of seats and thought that the contestants must look like so many tiny figurines to those sitting at the highest level.

He told Julis as much in a whisper, and she shrugged theatrically. “They’ll set up a giant air-screen for the upper levels during the games. If they’re too far to see the stage, they can still watch the fights that way.”

“Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of coming all this way?”

“I don’t understand it, either, but the important thing is to be here, apparently.”

I guess that’s how it is, Ayato thought, turning his gaze forward again.

The lines of contestants fanned out around the podium in front. The mayor of Asterisk had finished making his remarks, and a good-looking man had just taken his place.

“Good morning, everyone. I’m thrilled that I will be able to see your valiant contests again this year. And to those of you who have only arrived here in Asterisk in the past year, allow me to greet you for the first time. I am the chairman of the Executive Committee for the Festa, Madiath Mesa,” he told the contestants in a clear, calm voice while flashing an affable smile.

“That’s the chairman of the Executive Committee?” Ayato asked Julis. “He looks pretty young.”

The man had to be in his early thirties. His position as chairman effectively made him the highest authority running the Festa, so it followed that he was an executive member of one of the integrated enterprise foundations. Despite this, he was clearly younger than Kirin’s uncle Kouichirou.

With chiseled features and a cheerful tone, he also projected an easy confidence. Even from a distance, Ayato could tell he possessed a hard-trained physique—and that he was a Genestella.

“Seidoukan is Madiath Mesa’s alma mater.” Julis sighed at Ayato’s ignorance. “I don’t remember how old he is, but you’re right, he isn’t very. He’s not even forty. And he’s quite the fighter himself—he won the Phoenix when he was a student.”

“I see. That explains it…”

Ayato could sense the chairman’s quiet, heavy prana, even in its inactive state.

“He’s been quite effective as the committee chairman,” Julis went on. “I think he assumed the position a few years ago, but he’s led the pro-reform faction changing the regulations and bringing about new rules and events. All of the changes have been well-received, too.”

“If he’s an alum from our school, that means he’s an executive at Galaxy, right?”

“On paper, yes.”

“On paper?” Ayato looked at her curiously.

“When he won the Phoenix, Madiath Mesa wished to join the Executive Committee upon his graduation,” Julis replied wearily.

“Huh. I didn’t know you could ask for something like that.”

One of the fundamental facts of the Festa was that the integrated enterprise foundation grants any wish of the champion. Still, Ayato imagined the people in charge were less than pleased to hear a wish that would directly affect their own administration.

“Being a part of the committee doesn’t mean you’ll leave a mark, necessarily,” Julis said. “But I’ve heard he’s been working to make connections since he was a student. I’ve met him a few times. He’s not someone to take lightly, I will say that.”

“Hmm.” Ayato studied the chairman.

And then, Madiath’s gaze caught his—or so he thought.

Huh…?

The moment came and went so quickly that Ayato could not be sure it had actually happened.

On the podium, Madiath continued, “Now, I could drone on about how exciting this all is, but I’d only lose your interest. Allow me to explain one significant change to the regulations, and I’ll end my remarks there. We have notified each school of this change, so I’m sure that some of you already know about it.”

Seeing how Madiath continued his speech as if nothing had happened, Ayato wondered again whether he had been imagining things.

“We have never placed any restrictions on Luxes for the Festa, but technology advances quickly. There are now things we must address. I’m speaking in particular about sentient machines, and whether such devices can be treated as weapons.”

The person who reacted first to Madiath’s words was, naturally, Saya.

In just a few moments she had gone from nodding off to focusing on the podium, lips pursed.

“Our core philosophy is to give you, the contestants, as much freedom as possible. Still, if we don’t address this subject at all, it would be possible for a contestant to bring in multiple machines. That would hardly be fair, I think. Well, unless it’s the ability of a

Strega or Dante, of course." With a practiced air, Madiath continued his meticulous explanation at a measured pace. "At the same time, we felt it would be out of the question to limit the number of weapons. We could simply ban the use of machines as weapons but, as I said, our desire is not to add short-sighted restrictions. We feel that that would lead to stagnation, and eventually to decline. Therefore—and I want you all to understand that this is an interim measure to guide the debate for how to deal with this issue in future tournaments… Thus, we decided, for this tournament, to allow for their use as proxy fighters."

The whole arena erupted in murmurs. The spectators were as intrigued as the participants.

Madiath waited for them to quiet before he continued. "I'm sure that an intelligent bunch such as yourselves will understand that this measure does not give an advantage to any one school, but is meant to guarantee the fairness of the games in the near future and onward. I hope we can have your faith in our unremitting efforts to prepare the best path forward for you, the contestants."

The chairman then turned to the seated crowd and spread his arms wide. "And to all of you, the fans—Your love and support make the Festa possible! This is just one step in the evolution of the games, and I hope you're as excited for it as we are. The Festa will always be the highest form of entertainment in the world, the stage for incomparable excitement and drama, the contest that shakes your very soul!"

With his forceful proclamation, the crowd burst into a storm of applause.

Ayato recalled what Claudia had told him: The audience hardly cared about details as long as they were entertained, and they tended to welcome any changes as more interesting. That certainly seemed to be the case today.

On the other hand, the reaction from the students onstage was quite cool. This was only natural, as they now had one more variable to consider.

Madiath offered some closing remarks, then descended from the podium smiling and waving.

The tedious ritual carried on for a fair while longer. It was almost noon before the competitors finally regained their freedom.

"We now conclude the opening ceremonies for the Twenty-fifth Festa and the Twenty-fourth Phoenix. Contestants who are participating

today in Blocks A through I should report to their corresponding arenas by the appointed time." The contestants began to disperse from the stage as the announcement rang out from the speakers.

"We're fighting here at the main arena, so we don't really need to go anywhere, right?" Ayato asked. The first round was conducted over four days, but he and Julis were fighting today.

"Yes. Still, we have a lot of time until our match, so we could eat a light lunch before then."

"Okay, then. Let's do that." Ayato agreed readily, since he was already hungry. "Hey, do you want to join—Huh?"

He started to invite Saya and Kirin, then broke off to swivel his head around in confusion. The other two girls were suddenly nowhere to be found.

Their match was tomorrow, so they had no reason to move to another arena.

"Where'd they go…?"

Neither girl was particularly tall, so they would be difficult to find in a crowd of this size.

"Oh, hey!" Ayato spotted a familiar face among the students headed toward the main gate. It didn't belong to Saya or Kirin, but this was another person he wanted to see. "Hey, Lester. Are you fighting today, too?"

Lester MacPhail stopped in his tracks, answering Ayato's smile with a frown. "What about it?"

"We're going to fight today. We were just saying we should get some food, so I thought maybe we could all go together… You too, Randy."

A chubby student—Lester's partner, Randy Hooke—stared back blankly.

"Like I said, Amagiri, I'm not interested in getting cozy with you!" Lester growled, jabbing a finger at Ayato.

"No, I'm not trying to… I mean, I still haven't thanked you for letting me borrow your Lux the other day."

"Why would I care about that? Besides, we have to get to our arena. We'll eat there. You coming, Randy?!"

"Ack—Wait for me, Lester!"

Randy rushed to catch up with Lester's long-legged strides, a familiar pastime.

However, unlike the scene in his memory, this time Lester stopped and turned around.

“I’ll tell you this. The ones I *really* want to fight in this Phoenix aren’t some chumps from another school. It’s you two. So don’t you dare lose before then!”

With that, Lester marched off.

“He’s always so difficult…,” Julis moaned, but Ayato sensed a tone of sympathy in her voice. Or maybe he had just imagined it.

“…Ayato located.”

“Whoa!” He cried out in surprise as a pair of arms wrapped around him from behind. “Oh, it’s you, Saya. Don’t scare me like that.”

“…Too easy,” Saya said somewhat proudly, clinging at his waist.

Ayato hadn’t exactly let his guard down, but he didn’t stay vigilant 24-7, either. He couldn’t deny that his reaction was a little slower against people who meant him no harm.

“Where’d you go, anyway?” Ayato asked. “I was looking for you.”

“S-sorry. We went back to the locker room to get this.”

Ayato turned to see Kirin hunched behind Saya, holding a sizeable bundle.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Saya stepped away from Ayato, leaning back to stick out her tiny chest. “Ha-ha! Now, this will astound you. Allow us to present…your lunch!”

“Lunch?” Julis regarded Saya with suspicion.

“W-well, Miss Sasamiya and I—I mean, Saya and I—talked about it the other day. We made it to encourage you. Um, we hope you like it!” Kirin said, holding out the stacked lunch boxes, her face bright red.

“Wow, you made lunch just for us?”

Kirin nodded at the floor, while Saya stood beaming with confidence.

“I don’t have much—Well, I hardly have any cooking experience at all, so Saya taught me a lot. It’s very simple, though…!”

“Oh? Sasamiya, are you that good? Can you teach other people?” Julis asked.

Saya boastfully cleared her throat.

As Saya puffed up enough to pop, Ayato opened the lunch box to find it packed full of rice balls. They were terribly shaped, and

even in the spirit of encouragement, one could hardly say they looked good. To Ayato, however, the poor appearance said more than anything how hard they had worked.

"I-I'm sorry—I'm really bad at this…"

"No, this is great. Thanks, Kirin," Ayato said, gently petting her head.

Kirin let out a delighted squeak as she shrunk even further.

Saya jealously tugged on Ayato's sleeve.

"Ayato, Ayato. Look at mine, too."

"Oh. Sure."

Ayato opened the next tier of the lunch box and saw that it, too, was filled with rice balls. They were much more shapely than Kirin's and looked very tasty indeed.

But there was just one issue.

"They're pretty, um…big," Julis said, peering into the lunch box with a conflicted expression.

The rice balls were about three times the normal size, packed in so perfectly that the lack of gaps was more impressive than anything.

"Bigger is better. That's my motto," Saya said.

"That's well and good, but…the whole lunch box isn't full of rice, is it?" Julis asked.

"It is. What about it?"

"Nothing. I was just impressed that you're saying you taught someone how to cook."

Saya coughed again with mock humility.

Julis rubbed her forehead. "Just so we're clear, that wasn't a compliment."

Saya didn't pay her any mind.

"Well, now we have more than enough food for everyone. Isn't it perfect?" Ayato said.

"That was the plan all along," Saya said.

"Hear that, Julis?" Ayato tried to coax out her favor.

Julis nodded, albeit hesitantly. "All right, then. I suppose I'll take advantage of your generosity."

"Then it all works out. Now, let's find a place where we can sit…," Ayato began, until Saya grabbed his sleeve. "Yeah?"

"…Me too."

Saya seemed a little embarrassed, which was rare for her. It was no more than a faint glow in her cheeks, perhaps invisible to

someone who hadn't known her for years.

"You too…?" Ayato wondered for a moment what she meant, but as her eyes darted between him and Kirin, he realized.

"Ohh. You mean… You too?"

"Be fair."

With a tired smile, Ayato gave Saya a pat on the head, too. She was a little shorter than Kirin, which made it easier.

"…Mm. That feels nice." Saya narrowed her eyes in pleasure, quite satisfied.

The sight reminded Ayato of a cat, strangely endearing.

Beside them, Julis cleared her throat, looking dejected. "Well… Actually, our prep room will be available soon. We should be able to eat in there," she said, then headed off without waiting for the other three.

"Hey, Julis! Wait up!" Obviously, they couldn't stand in the passageway like this forever. Ayato beckoned for Saya and Kirin to follow and hurried after Julis with the lunch box in his arms.

*

"Whew. Thank you for lunch." In the waiting room, Ayato finished the last rice ball and placed his palms together in appreciation.

"You're welcome," said Kirin, whose lunch was already gone. "Oh—Would you like some tea?"

She poured from the thermos bottle she had brought. She was very well prepared.

"Thanks, Kirin."

"S-so, was it…?"

"Yes, it was delicious."

Kirin's face lit up at those words.

Indeed, while her rice balls were not shaped very well, they tasted just fine. She must have been quite anxious, as her expression now seemed to be composed of equal parts joy and relief.

"…I ate a little too much," Saya said, lying on the sofa and rubbing her stomach.

"No wonder. If you had three or four of those giant rice balls," Julis remarked exasperatedly beside her.

"Oh, hey—I think it's about to start." Ayato checked the time and turned on the TV. The prep room was quite large, able to accommodate the four of them with space to spare. Near one of the walls, an air-screen opened up.

"Hi there! I'm here at the Sirius Dome, the stage for the first fight of the Twenty-fourth Phoenix Tournament! This match will be called by yours truly—Mico Yanase, announcer for ABC. Pham Thi Tram,

graduate of Jie Long Seventh Institute and current commander of Executive Aladfar, will serve as our commentator!"

"Thanks. Can't wait to see this fight."

"Now, not that I think there's much need, but let's go over the rules. Victory is decided when both members of a team have lost their school crests or consciousness, or forfeit. The school crest system will announce the outcome."

"And there you have the main point of difference with the Gryps, where the match is decided when the team leader loses."

The screen showed one woman with voluminous curls, and another who wore her black hair neat and short. The former seemed to be the play-by-play announcer.

"It's almost time for the first fight. We're in the second, so we still have some time," Julis said.

"Oh, but there are matches going on at other arenas at the same time, right?" Ayato realized. "How do they broadcast them all?"

"There's a broadcast channel assigned to every arena," Julis replied tiredly. "The average viewer would choose which fight to watch, but I've heard some serious fans watch multiple channels at the same time."

In the first round, there were eleven stages, and thirty-three matches every day. Although the start times were staggered somewhat, it would not be easy to absorb them all.

"…They broadcast the highlights and summary later, anyway," Saya said, still lying down, turning to the screen with her eyes only.

"I think fans like that prefer to see everything live," Kirin replied with a half smile. "Oh—But since you've been assigned to the main arena, that means that you're considered a favorite, doesn't it?"

"Really? It does?" Ayato said.

"Yes. The contestants who garner the most attention usually fight here," Julis answered. "It's only natural for a team with a top-tier student. And look…"

She gestured toward the screen with her chin. It showed the names of the tag partners scheduled to fight at the Sirius Dome.

Ayato recognized a pair of names in the third match. "Oh, so they're fighting here today, too."

Ernesta Kühne and Camilla Pareto, the pair from Allekant.

Without a word, Saya raised herself up and glared tersely at the screen. Her fierce resolve was almost tangible. She seemed to have

some important reason for wanting to fight them.

Glancing sidelong at Saya, Julis stood and stretched from fingertips to toes. “We should worry less about opponents we may or may not face and more about the ones in front of us.”

Unable to argue with that logic, Ayato nodded in agreement.

“You’re up against knight-cadets of Gallardworth, right, Ayato?” Kirin said.

“Yes. Ranked 31 and 41, I think.”

The Page One fighters of Gallardworth were called the Silverwinged Knights, and those ranked lower in the Named Cult were considered cadets. Gallardworth was the only one of the six schools considered an “elite” institution, and their opponents had to be excellent fighters to have ranked there at all. Indeed, their data and records backed that up.

“How do you feel, Ayato? Do you think we can beat them?” Julis asked.

“Well…I’ll give it all I’ve got,” he replied. The two exchanged a look and quietly laughed.

Kirin watched them curiously. “Do you have some kind of special plan?”

“No,” Julis said, definitively shaking her head. “Just the opposite. Well…you’ll see.”

*

“And now, it’s time for our second bout of the day—the first match in the first round of Block C!”

The live announcement reverberated through the giant arena.

After a beat, the crowd roared to shake heaven and earth, countless lights danced in every direction, and Julis and Ayato stepped slowly from their gate out onto the stage.

“The first two onstage are Ayato Amagiri, Seidoukan Academy’s number one, and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld, number five! Now, Amagiri only rose to the top a few weeks ago in a duel against the former top-ranked student! He is a truly brand-new star—so new, in fact, we still don’t have much data on him ourselves! Ah, although we did hear his nickname Murakumo *came from Seidoukan’s student council president, Miss Enfield, herself.”*

“And he’s the only student in the Phoenix with a number one rank.

Lookin' at the videos going around of his fights, he's pretty strong, no doubts there. This one's gonna be interesting."

"I watched those, too, of course, but they're all duels, so that does leave some questions. I wish we could've seen him in an official match. Oh, that's right—Amagiri wields the Ser Veresta, an Orga Lux in Seidoukan's collection… Have you heard of it, Pham?"

"Uh-huh, that's one of the so-called Four-Colored Runeswords. Pretty famous as weapons go, but I've only seen it in action in old videos. They say it's a real difficult Orga Lux; no one's been able to use it in the last umpteen years, so. Now the Lei-Glems is the best known of the Runeswords, but the Ser Veresta is also impossible to defend against, or so I've heard."

"Mm-hmm, I see. And not only that, his tag partner is the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, Riessfeld. A team like that has got to be among the favorites!"

"Riessfeld's diverse powers really stand out, you know. She's probably one of the best Stregas in active competition. And I think she'll keep improving, too. Sure would be nice to have someone like her with our organization when she graduates."

"Well, Riessfeld is a real, actual princess! It might not be easy for her to take on work at a private military company."

"Man, that's too bad. Anyway, Amagiri's the one to watch in this fight."

"Now, as for the Gallardworth team…"

As the back-and-forth between the announcer and commentator went on, Julis elbowed Ayato in the ribs.

"They're saying you're the one to watch, Amagiri," she whispered with a grin.

"I'm already nervous. You had to go and point that out to me?" Ayato teased back.

Julis leaned in close, amused. "Liar. I don't see a hint of nerves. You're as cool and collected as ever."

"I really am. I don't like being in the spotlight."

"He says, standing under the brightest spotlight in the world." Her shoulders shook with laughter.

"Well, you don't look worried, either, Julis. Even though it's your first time at the Festa, too."

"Well, I am a princess. I'm used to all the attention. Oh—You should get ready." Her joking attitude vanished, and her focus turned to the contestants ahead.

Two young men had appeared from the opposite gate, their Luxes already activated. One tall and one short, each member of the disparate duo held a sword-type Lux. At Gallardworth, swordsmanship was traditionally considered the one true path, and many students there chose swords for weapons.

Ayato drew the Ser Veresta from its holster but did not activate it.

"Oh, it's almost time for the match! Who will emerge victorious from this battle? Seidoukan or Gallardworth? Here we go—Our second match of the day!"

As if on cue, the school crest on Ayato's chest began to shine. Its functions during the Festa were completely automated, so there was no need to declare one's challenge or consent as in a duel.

"Phoenix Block C, Round One, Match One— Begin!"

No sooner had their school crests announced the start of the match than their two opponents surged forward with swords in hand. According to the data, they were both attack specialists who excelled at fighting in close quarters. They did not make use of a rear attacker. They probably sought to draw Ayato and Julis into close combat and make a swift conclusion to the match. If Ayato engaged with one, the other would go after Julis to prevent her from using long-distance attacks. A simple but effective strategy.

"Well, it's nothing we didn't plan for." Julis nodded confidently with her arms crossed. She had not even drawn her Lux. "I'll leave it to you, Ayato."

"Got it." He focused his prana in an instant. *"By the sword within me, I break free of this prison of stars and unchain my power!"*

The heightened prana broke the seal placed on him, releasing his explosive power. The Ser Veresta's enormous blade gleamed.

"Wha…?!"

Startled by the burst of prana, the two Gallardworth students slowed. And then—a gust of wind.

"Huh?"

"Ah…!"

To the two of them, it might have looked as if Ayato simply vanished. But just a moment later, two school crests fell to the ground with a dry *ting*.

Ayato had dashed past the pair and sliced through their emblems with superhuman speed.

“End of battle! Winners: Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!”

The automated announcement sounded over the utter silence that had descended on the arena.

It was as quiet as an empty room.

It did not last, though. Wild cheering erupted like a dam bursting to flood the arena.

“Th-that was amazing! No time for us to get a single word in! What incredible, incredible speed! What strength! An overwhelming victory, I think it’s safe to say!”

“I gotta say, pretty impressive.”

“His sheer power is one thing, but what really surprised me was the showmanship from Amagiri! That tremendous prana shot up like a pillar, and the crowd went crazy!”

“When it comes to the raw amount of prana, he might be neck and neck with our own company president. I wonder if he’d come join us when he graduates. Bet he’d be able to go straight into the field.”

Amid the excitement and fervor, the Gallardworth team stood in stunned silence.

As Ayato walked back to Julis, feeling a little bad for their opponents, she raised her hand to greet him.

“Hmm. I expected nothing less.” She smiled proudly, and he high-fived her.

The two left the stage after a match less than ten seconds long. It was an instant victory.

“Now we’ll be interviewed as the winners. No matter what they ask you, be as vague as you can. We don’t want to give the competition anything to work with,” Julis firmly reminded him.

“Got it. But you had me worried for a bit. You didn’t even activate your weapon.”

“Oh, no need to worry. I laid traps for them with my fixed ability. If they’d stepped too close—*boom*.” With a fearless smirk, Julis opened her fist to mimic an explosion. “In any case, we got through the first round without revealing our combination attacks.

Let's try to keep doing that."

Above all, they wanted to keep it hidden that Ayato's full strength had a time limit. A few might have gleaned some idea from watching his duels, but they wanted to avoid confirming any suspicions. In fact, they would have preferred not to break the seal publicly at all, but he could run out of time if he did it before the match began. Just as they had hoped, the crowd figured it was a type of showmanship. Neither Julis nor Ayato believed they could keep the secret all the way through the Festa, but it was better to do so for as long as possible.

One more thing they wanted to keep under wraps was their combination moves. Ayato and Julis had only been partners for about two months. While they had polished their teamwork as well as they could, they would inevitably fall short compared to pairs who had been fighting together for years.

Round-one opponents were one thing, but against those who could compete with Ayato, teamwork was going to be the key to victory. They wanted to go for as long as possible without revealing their moves.

"We won't run into any of the favorites during the rest of the preliminary rounds. Let's keep our cards close as much as possible until the main tournament." Julis's tone was light, but her face was tense with resolve as they walked down the corridor to the press room.

*

"Whew. We're back!"

"Sheesh…"

After returning to the waiting room, Ayato and Julis plopped down on the sofa in exhaustion.

"Oh! There you are!" Kirin exclaimed. "Congratulations!"

"…Why are you so tired?" Saya asked. "It was instant death for them."

Because the two had been watching, Saya and Kirin regarded them curiously.

"Well, the match was just fine," Ayato replied with a pained smile. "But the press conference after that…"

"The media from outside are so pushy. Compared to *that*, I'd

much rather deal with our journalism clubs." Looking thoroughly fed up, Julis chugged down the drink that Kirin offered her.

Indeed, the winners' interview after the match was beyond draining. Of course the interviewers asked about Ayato's flashy moves and the Ser Veresta, but they also inquired about his relationship with Julis and his reasons for entering the tournament. Eventually, they were hounding him for details about his private life that had nothing at all to do with the tournament, like his favorite food. The whole process dragged on for nearly an hour. By the end, it had completely drained them.

"Why, such kind words," came a voice near the wall.

"Oh, you're here, Eishirou."

"Well, congrats on your first win!" Eishirou grinned and took a picture of the two with his mobile.

"Just to be clear, I only said that you were better by comparison," Julis told him flatly. "Don't mistake that for any sudden affection on my part."

Eishirou shrugged theatrically. "Oh, of course. Your Highness is as severe as ever, I see."

Ayato or Julis could grant others access to enter or leave their waiting room as they pleased. Anyone else had to be let in from the inside. Saya and Kirin were the only ones with access, so the two must have let Eishirou in.

"So, what brings you here? You didn't come to cheer us on, did you?" Ayato asked.

It was already August, and most of the students who were not fighting in the Phoenix were on summer vacation.

Usually, gaining permission to leave Asterisk was not easy, but exceptions were made for long school breaks, and many students went home for the summer. On the other hand, many also decided to remain, as Eishirou had; the ratio was actually close to fifty-fifty.

"Well, you don't need me in your corner against opponents like that. I'm here for the third match."

"I see. Allekant." Julis nodded.

"Naturally, that announcement at the opening ceremony whet my journalist's appetite. They can say what they like, but the rule adjustment has everything to do with those two from Allekant. That's patently obvious. So I headed right over to their waiting room, and…"

"What did you find, Yabuki?" Saya strode up and planted

herself in front of him.

"Nope. Total lockdown. Security was so tight not even a mouse could sneak in. They would have slammed the door in my face, if there was a door to slam."

"…Oh." Saya's shoulders drooped.

"Well, no need to fret over that now. It's almost time for the third match," Julis said.

"Speaking of time," Ayato said, "don't Lester and Randy have their match soon?"

"Oh, yes. They were scheduled to fight in the Capella Dome, so it should be…" Kirin turned on the television and flipped through channels until the screen showed Lester's towering frame wielding the Bardiche-Leo.

"Hmm, they've already started," Julis said.

"Oh, good, it looks like they have the upper hand," Ayato observed.

Behind Lester, Randy fired a rapid stream of arrows. They fought well as a team, perhaps because they had known each other for a good while.

"I would've liked to go root for them in person, if our matches were on different days," Ayato thought out loud.

"You'd be lucky if he just chased you off," Julis teased. "It's better this way."

"…They are pretty good, though," Saya said, impressed with Randy's marksmanship.

"Well, MacPhail is a Page One, after all. And Randy Hooke used to be a ranked fighter. He's no slouch, either," Eishirou said.

"Their opponents are from Allekant," Kirin commented.

Lester's physical prowess was overwhelming both of his adversaries. He was in his element here. Randy provided superb ranged support himself, pinning down their competition as they tried to escape Lester's range of attack.

While the group gave their full attention to the match, suddenly a rumbling roar reached them through the walls.

"Wha…?!" They looked at one another in surprise, but then identified the noise.

It was cheering.

"Aw, crap! It started already?!" Eishirou hurried to open another air-screen.

They knew there could only be one reason for the crowd's

enthusiasm.

The earth-shaking hurrah went on and on, putting the reception of Ayato and Julis's sensational debut to shame with its fervor. The crowd was not just excited, but shocked.

Just as the five in the waiting room had expected, the screen showed two figures—not humans, but humanoid machines.

CHAPTER 3
AR-D AND RM-C

Of the two machines now standing onstage at the Sirius Dome, one closely resembled a battle puppet. It was, however, a good deal larger than the models in standard use. Standing over seven feet tall and shaped like medieval armor, it looked like a mechanical knight.

In contrast, the other was hardly distinguishable from a human —a woman, to be precise. Its face was almost too perfectly shaped, and its sleek body was wrapped in a metallic suit.

Both machines wore the school crest of Allekant Academy, the Dark Owl, on their chests.

"Here we go! The new Puppets from Allekant have finally been unveiled. In this tournament, they are proxies for Ernesta Kühne and Camilla Pareto. What do you think, Ms. Tram?"

"Well. In my line of work, I've fought a ton of Puppets, but I don't think the ones I've fought would be any match for Genestella, no matter how much they improve on the specs. So far, most battle Puppets have been externally controlled, and they could never beat us because they just can't respond as fast as a person. There'll always be that lag, so."

"I see, I see. But they say these Puppets are autonomous?"

"Well, it's true that sentient artificial intelligence—that is, AI that can make its own decisions—has been used in the field. Still, I've never seen any that can make decisions in battle at the same level as Genestella, so."

"Oh, is that right? But the regulations were even changed so these two could fight. That means they must *be better… Oh, excuse me… Hmm. Uh-huh…? Um,* ahem! *Sorry about that—Up here at the booth, we've just received more information on these two. And our source is*

none other than their developer, Ernesta Kühne!"

"Ooh, that's quite generous of her."

"She says she's releasing the information today. And… Let's see. According to this, the bigger one is Automated Puppet Prototype AR-D, or Ardy, and the female one is Automated Puppet Prototype RM-C, or Rimcy."

"They're proxy fighters, so should we refer to them as if they're human contestants?"

"Ah-ha-ha, I'm not sure about that. But there is a lot of interesting information here. For example…"

During the exchange between the announcer and commentator, Ardy and Rimcy's opponent—Moritz, the Spiral Mage, Septentrio ranked twelve at Le Wolfe Black Institute—clicked his tongue in irritation.

"I don't like this one bit! Those mechanical dolls are getting all the attention…"

Moritz's spiked-up black hair resembled a dead tree, but his eyes glinted with unusual ferocity. He spoke with a formal tone and —what was more atypical for a Le Wolfe student—he wore his uniform properly.

As a Page One fighter from Le Wolfe, albeit the lowest on the page, he would have drawn attention as a tournament favorite under normal circumstances. But it was clear who the main attraction on this stage was.

"The organizers have some nerve, using me as a prop for those flashy things…!"

"So what do you want to do, boss?" asked Gerd, his tag partner, activating his Lux behind him. Gerd had an austere and sturdy build, and he rested the assault rifle on his shoulder with the air of a practiced fighter.

Moritz led a group of several dozen students, and Gerd was one of his followers. He was an excellent shot, and the two had successfully reached the main tournament in last season's Phoenix. A man of few words and obedient besides, Gerd made an ideal partner.

"What is there to do?" Moritz replied. "The same as always. You just concentrate on backing me up."

Without any data on their opponent, they could not formulate a plan. Facing a completely unfamiliar adversary was not rare in a Festa event; all the schools often deployed previously unknown wild

cards into the mix. But even by those standards, this was unusual.

Then suddenly—

"You two humans—hear me!" Ardy's call to Moritz and Gerd was so loud, the vibrations buzzed on their skin. "I stand upon this battlefield at the command of my great master! I aspire not for victory, but to let the world know of the powers she has bestowed upon me! You two will be the first sacrifice upon which I build her glory!"

His speech was so unbelievably frank, so astoundingly haughty, it was hard to believe Ardy was a robot at all.

Moritz was completely dumbfounded.

Ardy ignored him and went on. "I shall give you one minute's time, during which I shall not move a single finger. Attack me to your heart's content."

A blue vein protruded on Moritz's temple, and his eyes flared with rage. "Why, you—!"

But just as Moritz took one step forward, a bullet of light smashed into the side of Ardy's head. His head tilted slightly at the impact, accompanied by a dull boom.

"That hurt, Rimcy," Ardy gruffly complained to his partner.

"Silence," Rimcy answered coldly without even turning to him. She held a large handgun-type Lux. "You dull, dim-witted, vapid, ignorant piece of junk. On what authority do you utter such foolishness? If you have the energy for inane prattle, you should use it in our master's service. We are to follow her orders, faithfully and without fail—nothing more. I would tell you to go back to the lab for maintenance on your head, but that would only make extra work for our master. You should simply break down here and be terminated. I would be happy to lend a hand."

She spoke just as articulately as Ardy—much more so, in fact. But her chilly disposition seemed more appropriate to a machine.

(Attacking before the start of a Festa match was a violation punishable by immediate disqualification. This rule did not apply, however, in the case of an attack against one's own teammate.)

"Say what you will, Rimcy, but foes like these would be insufficient to make the masses understand our excellence and our master's sublime magnificence. This is why I deemed it necessary to give the audience some sort of, well, showmanship…"

"Indeed, it is a wonderful idea to impress upon the world the greatness of our master. I give you credit for that."

“Ah, so you do see!” Ardy happily nodded several times. “Hmm…? Wait, then why did you shoot me?”

“Because I also found it rather annoying,” Rimcy deadpanned.

“…Oh. Well then, so be it.” Rubbing the place where he was shot, Ardy shut his mouth.

Rimcy sighed at him and turned back to Moritz and Gerd. “Now, humans—even though that pronouncement was uttered by a defective failure, taking it back may bring shame to our master. Therefore, I also—albeit reluctantly—promise not to attack you for one minute.”

As if this brought him to a place beyond anger, Moritz wore a thin smirk, astounded and condescending. An incredulous laugh broke from him. “Very well, I’ll take you up on that generosity, then!”

Now that he had a moment to think about it, their opponents were offering to fight them at a disadvantage. This was no reason to be angry. He did not care for being underestimated, but that was trivial if it would gain him a victory in a Festa tournament.

“Gerd, you get the thin one. I’ll take the hulking one.”

“Roger,” Gerd said from behind him.

“Well then, this is quite an interesting development… But it’s almost time for us to start! Which team will win this riveting match?!”

Just as the announcer finished speaking, the school crests declared the start of the duel.

“Phoenix Block H, Round One, Match One— Begin!”

Moritz immediately rushed at Ardy from the front.

Swirling winds rose up and wrapped around his arms, creating miniature tornadoes like drills.

This was Moritz’s power as a Dante: Borea Spira, a wind that could gouge through any substance. Despite its lack of flexibility, in terms of simple destructive power the ability was among the best at Le Wolfe.

In fact, his ability was so powerful and his willingness to use it so aggressive that he had been penalized for deliberate cruelty in a past match.

But, luckily for him, these opponents were not human. He wouldn’t have to restrain himself at all.

One minute is more than enough time. I'll turn you into a heap of scrap before anyone can blink…!

The wind drills roared, whirring faster and faster.

Ardy stood perfectly still with his arms crossed, true to his declaration.

"You're brave, I'll give you that," Moritz laughed. "I'll open a nice gaping hole in your metal gut, just like you asked for!"

Ardy remained in unmoving dignity. Moritz thrust out his right arm to drive his wind through Ardy's torso, but then—

"What?!"

Without warning, a translucent wall of light appeared in front of Ardy to block the blow. It was some three feet wide and six feet tall but had no thickness at all. At first glance, it resembled an air-screen, but it exerted physical resistance.

Moritz snarled. "Don't assume that a trick like that can save you from my power!"

The Borea Spira on Moritz's arms whined even louder, spinning more fiercely. Sparks fell from the point of contact, and the whole arena reverberated with the shrieking, grinding noise. Still, the wall did not budge.

"It is no use," Ardy said loftily.

His voice held both unconcealed pride and the candor of speaking a hard truth.

"Peh! In that case…" In an instant, Moritz moved around behind Ardy, then drove the Borea Spira into his back.

I don't know how that thing works, but if I attack him from a blind spot…

To make the most of his powers, which specialized in close-range combat, Moritz had trained himself well in martial arts. He was sure that his fluid motion would make it seem as if he had vanished. He struck with absolute confidence, but the result once again fell short.

The light blocked his attack as suddenly as before, Moritz was flabbergasted to find.

Ardy stood unperturbed, not even looking in Moritz's direction. "Forty-five more seconds," he said.

Feeling an indescribable terror, Moritz instinctively leaped away from his opponent. Cold sweat trickled down his back.

What if they were facing something beyond them?

The thought flashed through his mind, and Moritz shook his

head to chase it away.

“Gerd, change of plans! Get over here and…,” he began, turning, but trailed off as his eyes went wide.

Gerd appeared to be engaged in an intense firefight with the other Puppet, Rimcy. Both held large gun-type Luxes, and countless bullets of light flew between them.

But a closer look showed that Gerd was the only one on the offensive. Rimcy only fired as a counterattack.

No, that was not completely accurate.

Rimcy was not fighting back. She was blocking gunfire with gunfire.

Normally, if two bullets of light from a Lux were to strike each other, both bullets were annihilated unless one carried substantially more energy than the other, but this never happened deliberately. To cancel out every single shot of a semiautomatic barrage was nothing short of miraculous.

And Rimcy had not moved a step, her face utterly calm.

"What the hell…?!" Even Gerd's voice, usually so composed, shook with apprehension.

He adjusted his distance from Rimcy, looked for an opening, fired a hail of bullets—But none reached their target.

"Thirty more seconds." Ardy's voice recalled Moritz's attention from his partner's battle to his own.

Ardy and Rimcy were both exclusively on the defensive, true to their word. What would happen when they switched to offense…?

Moritz focused his prana and let out a ferocious roar, as if to shout away his fear.

All I have to do is beat them before our time is up!

A violent wind whipped around with Moritz at its center, then gathered into a twisting tornado. The same as the Borea Spira, its tip resembled the exposed point of a giant power drill.

The air in the arena shook, and the crowd murmured.

"*Borea Mordent*!"

This was Moritz's ace in the hole, his last resort. Not only was it hard to control, requiring a vicious cost in prana, it was slow and easy to evade, so this was not a move he used very often. But in his opinion, its capacity for destruction was unrivaled at Le Wolfe.

"Take this, if you can!" Moritz swung his arm, and the tornado writhed like a serpent toward Ardy.

As with his previous attacks, the barrier appeared to block it. Sparks flew as if from a small explosion, and a shrill noise like metal scraping against metal pierced his ears.

Even then, Ardy did not move.

With another furious roar, Moritz poured every last bit of prana he had into the Borea Mordent.

And still the wall of light did not waver.

The tornado jerked violently like a raging dragon, but slowly the wind weakened and the revolution slowed.

Out of prana, panting and heaving his shoulders with each breath, Moritz sank to sit on the ground.

Ardy stared down at him, then abruptly uncrossed his arms and opened his mouth. "One minute."

As he spoke, he activated a Lux in his hand, and an enormous hammer as long as his body materialized. The head was as wide as

Moritz's wingspan.

"It is time!"

Ardy walked up to Moritz with slow, heavy footsteps, then effortlessly lifted the hammer.

Crumpled on the ground, Moritz looked up at the weapon. He could do nothing but smile, his face taut with terror.

He glanced sideways to find Gerd already prone.

"You monsters," he muttered as the hammer fell.

"End of battle! Winners—Ernesta Kühne and Camilla Pareto!"

The automated voice rang over the stunned silence in the arena. Not a single person in the audience could utter a sound.

Moments later, the medical staff from the therapy center rushed in with panicked footsteps and ashen faces to carry away Moritz and Gerd.

And finally, cheers and applause fell on the stage like a storm.

*

"Now, that—that was something! *It took only one minute to decide the match! Well, I should say, the time itself isn't that extraordinary. Our second match, earlier today, ended even more quickly. But that one minute gave us a brief glimpse into the abilities of contestants Ardy and Rimcy—And I'd say, it was truly intense and enlightening! Who would have thought that this* duo*—well, "duo" makes them sound like people, but for the sake of convenience—who would have thought that this duo would be so powerful…"*

"Well, they completely upstaged us." Julis turned off the television and sank into the sofa with a long sigh.

Ayato, Kirin, and Saya all wore the same stunned, disbelieving look.

"Well, this is sure to be today's headline. If not for them, it definitely would have been you guys, Princess." Even Eishirou was unable to hide his shock. "Septentrio really couldn't do a thing against them—That *was* unexpected."

"It really was…," Kirin murmured, her voice faint. "Those two should have been formidable in their own right."

Julis slowly shook her head. "No, beating Moritz would be an

easy enough task for your team or ours. That's not the problem."

"Riessfeld is right." Saya nodded. "That light wall. That thing is trouble."

"I don't know how it works, but seeing how it completely blocked Moritz's ability, no ordinary attack is likely to penetrate it." Julis propped her chin on her fist in consternation.

"It works something like a defensive barrier…I think," Saya said.

"Defensive barrier? You mean like what surrounds the battle stage? I thought that took huge bulky equipment to generate…"

The force fields were installed to protect the audience from stray projectiles or other accidents, but they required enormous amounts of power and sizable infrastructure.

"Maybe…they miniaturized it for short-term use," Saya guessed.

"Interesting. Well, I'll try to find out about *that* if I can." Eishirou got up from the sofa.

"Find out…how?" Ayato said.

"They're about to do the winners' interview. I'm going to see if I can sneak in."

"Huh? But I thought that student media organizations didn't have access…," Kirin said.

As a general rule, members of outside media could not enter the schools—whereas in the Festa and other official Asterisk events, they were given preferential treatment. A student would probably not even be allowed into the press conference room.

Eishirou laughed slyly. "A true journalist finds a way. Just sit and watch."

He grinned at Kirin, who looked uneasy, then skipped out of the waiting room.

"Well. If he can get us something to work with, that would be helpful… Let's see what he brings back. But let's not expect too much either." Julis looked no more optimistic than she sounded.

"But we do need data," Saya muttered grimly.

"Right. Those machines and all of us in here will definitely reach the main tournament. We'll have to gather as much information as we can before then."

The competition had data on them, so with only today's match to go on they were at a definite disadvantage.

"We should try to see one of their matches in person," Ayato

said.

It was impossible to sense the flow of prana and mana over a broadcast or a video. The best thing would be to see it with their own eyes. Even the lowest tier of Festa tickets came at a premium, but contestants were allowed the use of spectator booths assigned to each school.

"If we can," Julis agreed. "We had some time today, but going forward the matches are scheduled closer together. It won't be so easy if we have matches on the same day like we did today."

"Oh. Okay."

Just moving from one arena to another could be a lot of work. And even if they fought at the same arena, depending on the timing of their respective matches they might not be able to take the time to sit down and watch the machines fight.

"…Hmm? Pardon." Saya abruptly took out her mobile device.

An air-window opened, but it was blank—meaning the caller had the video transmission off, and the user on the receiving end had theirs turned on. The caller could see them, but not vice versa.

"Ah, Saya, there you are! Did you see that match?!"

"…Yes."

"Ha-ha, the creator of those things—Ernesta Kühne, was it? She's young, but her work is quite good! I'd say those Puppets are using at least five manadites each, if I had to guess. And they're controlled by one central core rather than simply linked together. Mm-hmm, very *interesting! It would be impossible for a human being to operate, but theoretically possible for an AI!"*

"…I see. But calm down."

"Hmm? Oh, right! Sorry!"

Ayato thought he recognized that excited rambling. "Um… Uncle Souichi, is that you?"

"Oh, Ayato! How long has it been?! I saw your round, too. Good to see you're doing well!"

The happy voice undoubtedly belonged to the man who had once lived next door to Ayato—Saya's father, Souichi Sasamiya.

Huh…?

And yet, that voice wasn't quite the same as he remembered. There was something off, some tiny thing that stuck in his mind as unnatural.

"Hey, Ayato, is that…?" Julis asked in a whisper.

"Yes, it's Saya's dad," he answered.

Next to Saya, Kirin politely bobbed her head. “Um—Pardon me! Hello! I’m Kirin Toudou, and I’ll be fighting alongside Miss Sasamiya! It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir!”

“Ah, yes! Of the Toudou Style! I’ve heard lots about you. I do appreciate your teaming up with my little girl.”

“Oh—not at all, sir. I’m obliged to her for inviting me!”

“So, Dad? What do you want?” Saya prompted, somewhat embarrassed.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot! I sent you a new gun. Did you get it yet?”

“A new gun…? No, not yet.”

“Hmm. Probably got stuck in customs. Go and check. I’d hoped you’d get it before the Phoenix, but it looks like you won’t have it in time for the first match.”

“Not a problem,” Saya replied, her voice swelling with self-assurance even while her face remained serious. “I can win with my current arsenal.”

Souichi broke into laughter. *“Mm, naturally! With my handiwork, you’ll be unbeatable! Well, good luck then! Tell me all about your win later!”*

The air-window abruptly closed. That was certainly true to the Souichi in Ayato’s memory.

Did I imagine it…? Ayato wondered. It still felt as if something was off, but there was nothing specific he could place. He decided not to worry about it now.

“Well… Your father sure is talkative. Not at all like you, Sasamiya,” Julis remarked.

“And that’s when he’s holding back. He’ll talk the entire day if you let him.” With that, Saya put away her mobile and stood up. “…Okay. I’m off to check customs.”

“Oh—I’ll go with you!”

Saya and Kirin left the room together.

Now it was just Ayato and Julis. They turned to each other at the same time.

“So, what should we do now?” he asked.

“Well, I’d like to say we should celebrate our first victory. But I don’t think I can, after Allekant showed us *that*.” With a grim smile, Julis stood and extended her hand to Ayato. “Let’s go back to campus and get in some more practice. We have four days until our second match. Time enough for all the training we can stand.”

“All right.” Mirroring her expression, Ayato took her hand.

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“Hey, hey, good work, you two! What a great show!” Beaming, Ernesta greeted Ardy and Rimcy in the hallway that led to the press conference room.

“You are too kind, master.”

“*Bwa-ha-ha!* Now, that was nothing!”

Rimcy dropped to one knee in deference, while Ardy laughed heartily with his arms crossed.

Glancing sideways at her partner, Rimcy responded with a sharp leg sweep that skimmed the ground.

“Argh!” Ardy’s massive body fell forward, and nearly sprang back up with surprising agility. But before he could do so, Rimcy leaped onto his back and slammed his head into the floor.

Ardy groaned and tried to get up—but was unable to move an inch.

“How dare you act so insolently to our master. Have you no shame?”

“That hurt, Rimcy. You’re using your full strength, aren’t you?”

“Naturally. I have no reason to hold back against such disrespect.” Anger simmered beneath the calm surface of Rimcy’s voice.

Ernesta nodded in satisfaction at the scene.

Machines that could analyze the situation and make their own decisions were not rare. There were even machines possessing capacities that could be considered free will. What Ernesta had sought to create were beings who could feel and express their own emotions.

On that score, these two prototypes were already nearing her ideals.

“Now, now. That will do, Rimcy. Ardy didn’t mean any harm, see? And besides, you should get to the press room. You wouldn’t want to keep Camilla waiting.” Ernesta comforted her.

“As you wish, master.” Rimcy reluctantly released Ardy’s head.

They acted autonomously, and all their readings were stable. Things were going almost too smoothly.

The city guard, probably having caught wind of the recent

fracas, had Tenorio under close watch. That faction would have to tread lightly for a while. Nor was there any cause for concern with the tournament conditions.

As Ernesta chuckled, Ardy got to his feet and tilted his head on his thick neck. “I have a question, master.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“In terms of our technical specifications, there is no great difference in power output between me and Rimcy, correct?”

“Yep, that’s right. You have different body types because of your equipment and power allocation. So there are some discrepancies in the resulting data.” Ernesta offered an unhurried answer as she strolled.

“Then why is it that I am no match against her?”

“Oh, well, that’s just the way it is. I quote: ‘Woman is Nature’s contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement. Man is Woman’s contrivance for fulfilling Nature’s behest in the most economical way.’ People in olden times sure had a way with words!” Ernesta’s line was a famous quote from a playwright in a previous century. “In this world, women come first. And fate makes no exceptions, not even for you two. Got it?”

“So, as long as I am in the male form, I cannot win against Rimcy, who is in the female form?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“…Hrrm,” Ardy grumbled. “Well then, so be it.”

Of course, that had nothing to do with it. Ernesta mentally stuck out her tongue.

The real reason Ardy could not go against Rimcy was simply that Ernesta had created her to be the safety to his trigger. Without her, *he would be too dangerous*.

“Indeed, it seems that the past champions of the Festa are disproportionately female,” Rimcy added, apparently having run a search of prior results.

Ernesta marveled that the records supported her white lie. She had never been particularly interested in the Festa and had never bothered to check such data.

“Well, the Witch of Solitary Venom from Le Wolfe is female, and she’s been described as the strongest fighter of all time. Oh, and there’s another scary girl from Le Wolfe in this Phoenix…” As Ernesta spoke, a slight frown clouded her expression.

She had anticipated the most significant obstacle in this

tournament to be the boy from Seidoukan, but there were other troublesome teams lurking in the shadows. Although popular opinion stated that this tournament was populated with relatively weak contestants, a closer look revealed that there were more than a few teams that should not have been underestimated. After all, there was no such thing as an easy Festa.

She didn't think for an instant that Ardy and Rimcy might lose, but not for lack of a challenge.

"It'd be great if the tough ones could just beat up on each other…" Ernesta smiled cynically at the ceiling.

CHAPTER 4
THE VAMPIRE PRINCESS

On the second day of the Phoenix, Julis and Ayato strolled around the outskirts of the central district's commercial area.

"Let's see… The Procyon Dome is—Oh, is that it?"

Ayato followed the floating three-dimensional signs to see a rounded roof, just visible beyond the crowds and the rows of buildings. It belonged to one of the three large arenas in Asterisk, commonly known as the Procyon Dome. The preliminary matches were held in three large arenas, seven medium-sized ones, and the central stage where Ayato and Julis had fought the previous day. The main tournament would be held at the main arena and the three large ones, the semifinals, and finals held exclusively at the main arena.

Ayato and Julis were on their way to the Procyon Dome to cheer for Saya and Kirin.

"There sure are a lot of people, even for the Festa…," Ayato said.

The masses filling the streets made it difficult even to walk in a straight line, driving home Asterisk's status as a tourist destination.

All the cafés and restaurants facing the streets were full. The numerous patrons with open air-windows were probably watching matches. Some places sold same-day tickets; perhaps these people were hopeful spectators unable to secure them.

"During Festa events, the crowds are exponentially denser. So be it." Julis's irritation was visible.

Not only were the streets congested, but people also actively stopped Ayato to talk to him, express their support, request a

handshake or an autograph, and generally take his time in unexpected ways.

"Those Allekant dolls may have taken away a lot of the attention, but you still made quite an impression in your debut," Julis told him. "Unlike the fans in the schools, fans from the outside don't have many opportunities to meet the contestants in person."

Julis's own devotees approached her on occasion, but she only delivered well-practiced refusals.

Ayato considered that he might have an easier time if he did the same. He felt bad turning them down, though, and couldn't quite pull it off.

"Who knows when we'll get there, at this rate," he sighed.

It was only a short distance from the subway station to the Procyon Dome, but their progress was at the pace of plodding cattle.

On top of everything, the fiery midsummer sun beat down mercilessly and roasted his skin. Ayato used his sleeve to wipe the sweat pouring from his brow.

"They're fighting in the second match, right? Then we still have some— Hmm?" Julis began, waving a round fan at herself, then looked suspiciously at something up ahead. Ayato followed suit to find an unmoving mass of people.

They could hear a faint clamor and angry yelling.

"A fight? Is *that* why we're not moving…?" Julis said.

Things certainly didn't seem peaceful, especially with the people trying to flee upstream.

Ayato and Julis nodded at each other and waded forward.

Emerging at the front of the crowd, they saw a girl standing in the middle of the street, surrounded by several men. They all wore Le Wolfe uniforms, and Ayato almost instinctively entered a fighting stance—considering that the last time he'd encountered this situation, he'd been attacked—but then he noticed several male students already on the ground. This seemed to be a real fight, not a trick.

But the girl was clearly in another league. The men wielded Luxes, but she beat them with her bare hands. Despite the heat, she had a scarf wrapped around her neck, whipping about in the wind of her movements.

"That girl— She's the Vampire Princess, Lamilexia" Julis said.

"Huh?" The alias sounded familiar to Ayato.

The third-ranked fighter at Le Wolfe—the one Julis had named as the most troublesome in this Phoenix.

Her name, as he recalled, was…

"Irene Urzaiz," Julis finished his thought. "What does she think she's doing at a time like this? She can't possibly be in her right mind."

Julis had every reason to be astonished. During a Festa event, there was a total ban on duels in the city. This was, needless to say, a provision established for the safety of visitors.

Dueling was allowed within barriers, but this meant the only legal venues were the stadiums in use for the Festa. In practice, the only fights allowed during the preliminary tournaments were the official ones.

And if dueling was banned, brawling, of course, was out of the question. A Festa participant would be subject to considerable penalties, possibly even ejected from the tournament.

"Man, you guys are annoying. 'Settling old scores'? What century are you from?"

In no time, Irene had all but taken care of the men. Of nearly ten opponents, only one remained.

"Sh-shut up! It's a matter of pride!" the man barked at her, even as he clearly wanted to turn and run.

"You really are a cheap bunch, getting so worked up 'cause I wrecked a casino or two. And all because *you* were cheating. Besides, if you get too outta line, won't that little fatso be mad at you?"

"I don't give a shit what the prez thinks! We got our own way of—"

"Ugh, shut up already."

Before the man could finish his sentence, Irene's roundhouse kick landed squarely on the side of his head. She watched with cold eyes as the man crumpled soundlessly to the ground. She let out a long sigh.

Her movements were not those of someone who had been trained in martial arts. They were fluid and bestial.

"Hey! What're you dipshits looking at?!" Irene shouted at the spectators—until her glare paused on Ayato. "Huh?" She peered sharply at his face. "Ooh, if it ain't the Murakumo. Nice. That saves me some trouble."

Irene grinned, revealing a pair of pointed fangs.

So she knows who I am, he thought.

She strode over to Ayato to appraise him. It was unclear what she wanted, but he didn't sense any enmity from her, so he let her look.

Finally Irene laughed through her nose at him. "Heh. So *this* is the guy…"

"Exactly what business do you have with my tag partner, Lamilexia?" Julis interjected, and less than cordially.

"The Witch of the Resplendent Flames, huh? My business ain't with you. Stay outta this."

"I don't think so. A fighter brawling during the Festa—in the middle of a crowd of tourists, no less—is too dangerous to ignore."

Irene's eyes narrowed. "Those guys wanted to pick a fight with me. Wasn't *my* idea."

"Even so, to accept a challenge in a place like this is absurd."

The tension between them threatened to turn from uncomfortable to ugly. *This doesn't look good*, Ayato thought. "Um, hey, Julis…?"

"Oh yeah? Then why don't you show me how *you'd* handle it!" Irene drew a Lux from her hip holster and activated it.

Ayato and Julis both jumped back and fell into stance.

The weapon took shape as an enormous scythe, longer than Irene was tall. There was something sinister about its purple blade, an uncanny air clinging to it.

"Ooh, better reactions than I thought," Irene taunted. "Guess I shouldn't judge books by their covers."

"So that's…the Gravisheath." Ayato gulped.

It was the notorious Orga Lux in the possession of Le Wolfe, known for its ability to manipulate gravity. Unusually for an Orga Lux, it yielded a high compatibility rating with anyone, allowing it to devastate the Festa in the past.

There were few, however, who had wielded it with much skill. Whether Irene could do so was still unknown.

"Let's go, Ayato."

"…Yeah."

Neither wanted a duel here.

"So, you're the type to turn tail and run. Pretty smart." Irene laughed high and cruel, then her eyes lit with a vicious gleam and she readied the Gravisheath. "If you *can*, that is."

She emanated a chilling thirst for blood that choked the air around them, as if a momentary lapse in concentration would spell the end.

The crowd surrounding them watched in total silence. And then —

"*Heeeeeeeeeeey!*" came a jarring call. "Are you getting into fights again, sis?! After I told you and told you to stay out of trouble?!"

A savagely furious girl emerged from the crowd. Her braided hair was the same color as Irene's, and there was a clear resemblance in her features as well. She also wore a Le Wolfe uniform.

"Gah! P-Priscilla…!"

"I let you out of my sight for *one* second… How did this even happen? You better have a good explanation, Irene!"

"Well, uh, see, it's just…"

As Ayato and Julis blankly watched the exchange, the girl noticed and bowed to them. "I'm so sorry my big sister's causing you trouble!"

"Oh, well… It's nothing…" Julis, all the fight taken out of her, could only give an awkward reply.

"You apologize, too, Irene."

"Wh-why do I—?"

"Just say it!"

"Ugh. Fine." Berated into submission, Irene reluctantly dipped her head in a chagrined bow. "Sorry. Now get out of here."

"Seriously? You have to apologize and mean it!" Priscilla put her hand on Irene's head and forced it downward alongside her own in a show of contrition. "I'm so sorry. I'll give her a good talking-to."

Yanking Irene away with her, she disappeared into the crowd.

Ayato and Julis, as well as the spectators, were all left momentarily speechless.

"…Oh, so that was Irene Urzaiz's tag partner, right?" Ayato said.

"Um, yes, I suppose. She called Irene her big sister, so she must be."

They were still rather stunned, but when they checked a mobile device, they found the face of the second girl.

Priscilla Urzaiz, Irene's younger sister and tag team partner. But beyond her name and photo, there was hardly any data on her.

"Anyway, why did you talk to her like that just now?" Ayato demanded.

Julis averted her face to feign innocence. "I don't know what you mean."

"Come on, don't play dumb. You know you didn't have to provoke her like that."

Irene might be the hyper-aggressive type, but the situation might not have become so volatile if Julis hadn't intervened.

Julis gave up with a sigh and leaned in to murmur in Ayato's ear. "You really didn't notice?"

"Huh…?"

"Irene said, 'My business ain't with you.' Even though *I* was the one who confronted her. That can only mean she had some particular reason to go after you."

"Okay, but… It's not like we've met before."

It was nothing strange for Irene to know who he was. If she had files on him that was only natural; he was ranked first at Seidoukan. Other contestants would have taken note of him.

But now that Julis mentioned it, there was something more behind the way Irene had spoken to him.

"People at Le Wolfe will use whatever means they can to accomplish their goals. I wouldn't be surprised if they had some illicit scheme up their sleeve."

"I dunno…" Ayato would have liked to say that Julis was overthinking—but that was the scary thing about this city. She may not have been.

"I wanted to see if she would give away anything more, but… Oh, well. I didn't think she'd actually want to start a fight. That was my fault." Julis bowed, sincerely apologetic.

Ayato waved it off. “No, no, it’s fine—” Then he remembered. “Oh no! We’d better run, or we’ll miss Saya and Kirin’s match!”

He checked the time to find that they didn’t have very long.

“You’re right,” Julis agreed. “Let’s get to the arena.”

Just as they were about to head to the Procyon Dome, they noticed another hubbub slightly up ahead.

“What could it be *now*—? Oh, that’s not good! It’s the city guard!” Julis frowned.

Ayato could see two men in unfamiliar uniforms wading through the crowd toward them. “The city guard? So that’s Stjarnagarm?”

That was the peacekeeping organization that acted as a police force in Asterisk. He had heard about the city guard, but it was his first time seeing them in person.

“This is no time to stand around gawking! Let’s get out of here!” Julis took his hand and pulled him away from the guards.

“Wait, it’s not like we did anything wrong…”

“I hate to say it, but the city guard are not the understanding sort. Who knows how long it’d take to explain this to their satisfaction.”

Ayato looked around at the men sprawled on the street. *True. This would not be easy to justify.*

“I guess you’re right,” he sighed.

The city guards were approaching from the direction of the Procyon Dome, so they had no choice but to distance themselves from their destination.

“Hey! You two—Stop right there!”

Without a glance back toward the authoritative shouts, Ayato and Julis blended into the crowd and escaped down an alleyway.

*

“Time’s up.”

“So it is…”

Saya and Kirin each let out a small sigh and rose from the sofa in their waiting room at the Procyon Dome. The two girls had waited for Ayato and Julis to fulfill a promise of moral support, but there was no sign of their friends.

“I wonder if something happened to them…?” Kirin worried,

just as Saya's mobile received an incoming call.

"Sorry, Saya! Something came up and we'll probably be late…"

It was Ayato. Was he whispering for some reason, or were they imagining it?

Kirin peeked over Saya's shoulder at the air-window.

"…The match is starting," Saya said.

"Yeah, we know… Sorry." The tiny image of Ayato hung his head.

"Fine. Waiting room after the match. We'll hear your excuse then."

"Okay. Well, good luck! You, too, Kirin." Ayato nodded to her.

"Thank you!"

The air-window turned off.

Good luck. Those simple words were enough to turn Kirin's mood around completely. Moments ago she had looked so glum, and now her head was high with determination.

"…Doesn't take much for you, does it?" Saya remarked.

"Huh? Wh-what do you mean?" Surprised and flustered, Kirin flushed crimson.

Saya tapped her on the back and walked out of the room.

"Oh, wait—wait for me!" Kirin hurried after Saya as she ambled down the hallway. "*Whew.* You certainly like to do things your own way, Saya."

"I get that a lot."

Kirin caught up with a forced smile, but Saya was as unreadable as usual, showing not a hint of excitement or anxiety. Being the timid type herself, Kirin envied her composure, although it did nothing to quell the butterflies in her stomach.

Still, there was something comforting about that, too, for some reason.

"And here we are! Walking up to the stage are Kirin Toudou, the former top-ranked student at Seidoukan Academy, and her partner, Saya Sasamiya!"

They went through the gate to take the stage, where dazzling lights and an overly enthusiastic announcer's voice greeted them.

"Toudou is just thirteen, but she climbed to first place in her first month at school! Although she lost that rank a short while ago, her abilities are beyond question! But I gotta say, seeing her for myself, she has a rare sangfroid to her—so small and yet cool as a cucumber…"

"Nana, Nana, c'mon. I think you got it backward. That little one is

Sasamiya. And the nervous one next to her is the former top dog."

"Whaaat?! You mean that's a high schooler? For real? Uhh… Ahem. *Sorry about that, everyone!"*

"I told *ya to look through the files. Seriously."*

The announcer and commentator at this arena seemed to have a good deal of personality.

"…How unpleasant," Saya said, flat and sullen, as Kirin giggled nervously.

Saya looked at the two students standing opposite them onstage.

One was a frail-looking young man with long hair tied at the nape of his neck, and the other was well-built and bald. Their school crests depicted golden dragons—indicating that they attended the Jie Long Seventh Institute.

Jie Long was the most eccentric of the six schools of Asterisk, with two defining characteristics. One was the widespread use of their own mana-wielding technique, known as Seisenjutsu; the other, a complete dedication to perfecting the martial arts.

Although there were many separate martial arts styles within Jie Long, including some that specialized in the use of weapons, the school's name connoted a high caliber of unarmed combat. Of course, unarmed fighters were generally at a disadvantage against those using weapons, but this was also the only way to directly convert prana into an attack. These attacks, compounded by their finely trained martial arts prowess, gave them peerless might in close-range combat.

Indeed, of the two students in front of Saya and Kirin, only the bald one held a massive falchion-shaped Lux. The long-haired one stood unarmed.

"They're both unranked, but they seem quite capable," Kirin said.

Being the largest of the six schools, Jie Long boasted many skilled fighters outside of the Named Cults. They could not be underestimated.

"We'll work it out," Saya said. Still calm, she activated her Lux with practiced ease.

A massive, inelegant gun materialized in her hands, setting the crowd to murmuring. They were apparently impressed by its height relative to hers, but in truth, this was relatively small for her arsenal. Still, it was almost as large as she was.

“Um, that’s your…”

“Type 34 Wave Cannon, Ark Van Ders, improved model.”

Saya had over ten Luxes, and Kirin had seen them all at least once. This was only natural when they were fighting together as a team. Some of Saya’s weapons, however, were frankly just startling.

“…Which one do you want?”

Kirin blinked in confusion for a moment, until she figured out that Saya was asking her to choose her adversary. “Huh? Oh, hmm… I don’t mind.”

“Then I’ll take the big one.”

“Understood.” That meant Kirin’s opponent was the long-haired one.

She steadied her breathing and deliberately drew her katana an inch from its scabbard.

“Phoenix, Block L, Round One, Match Two— Begin!”

The very moment the announcement ended, Kirin leaped into range.

As if he had predicted her move, his fist shot out toward her. But he was too slow. Kirin ducked and sliced up toward his chest from a low stance.

The fist met the flat of her blade and brushed aside the attack. At the heavy impact, Kirin let out a startled cry. A barehanded blow powered with prana really was something else. Without weapons in his way, his agility allowed for few openings to attack.

…And yet, this was tepid compared to Ayato’s movements.

Turning the katana with her wrists, Kirin slashed downward from an upper stance. Her opponent twisted to dodge with a grunt, but he was clearly off balance.

He unleashed a kick, quite fierce considering he was on the defensive. Kirin evaded it effortlessly and swept the Senbakiri straight across.

As she felt the unmistakable sensation of cutting through a solid object, her opponent’s school crest announced his defeat.

Kirin let out a breath of relief and swung her sword a final time to shake off any debris, then turned her back to the man dropping to his knees. The announcer’s excited voice filled her ears.

“S-so fast! You’d expect nothing less from Seidoukan’s former star.

That confrontation barely lasted moments, with Toudou coming out on top. The fight was decided in no time!"

"Yo, Nana! The fight with shorty over here is getting interesting, too!"

Kirin turned toward Saya's own bout.

"Whoa, you were not *kidding! This is also quite the heated contest —These partners are not to be outdone! And get a load of this! I thought from her equipment that Sasamiya would be sticking to long-range combat, but wow-ee… She is going all out in close quarters!"*

Saya was indeed fighting at close range. As the bald man brought down his falchion, she parried the blow with the Ark Van Ders. Then she counterattacked with the barrel as if it were a club. The massive firearm in tiny Saya's grasp already made for quite a sight, and the way she swung it with one arm was beyond astonishing.

On top of that, she was not simply flailing it around. With her parries and well-timed counters, it was immediately clear she had been trained in close combat.

Even Kirin had been surprised to see that the first time, she recalled.

Initially, she had been amazed at Saya's high level and finely honed skill. Then, that her attacks were the same as Ayato's—which was to say, the Amagiri Shinmei Style.

Her opponent growled and sparks flew fiercely as his falchion clashed with the Ark Van Ders. Saya clearly had him on the defensive, while she was calmly waiting for the right time. As stoic as ever, she executed one attack after another.

As the battle continued, the manadite of the Ark Van Ders shone brighter and brighter. Panic crept over the bald student's face as he realized what was happening.

He attacked even more relentlessly, his blade clashing against the barrel of the gun. Neither Saya nor the Ark Van Ders budged an inch.

The instant the glow of the manadite reached its apex, Saya knocked the falchion upward with her fastest stroke yet and placed the mouth of the gun at the student's gut.

"*…Burst.*"

The shock wave felt like a catastrophic earthquake, and the blast knocked the man to the opposite end of the stage. A booming roar drowned his scream as he slammed into the barrier, and his

motionless body slid to the ground. Smoke rose from him as if he'd been burned to a crisp.

All of Saya's Luxes had tremendous destructive power. Taking fire from one at point-blank range didn't exactly allow an opponent to fight back.

"End of battle! Winners: Saya Sasamiya and Kirin Toudou!"

As the mechanical voice announced their victory, Saya turned toward Kirin and, without so much as a smile, extended her right hand. "…V for victory."

The waiting room was well equipped, outfitted with enough showers to accommodate several people, since this building also hosted the team Gryps.

With their match over, Saya and Kirin were rinsing off.

Basking in the pleasant sensation of hot water, Kirin asked a question she had held in for a while: "So, it's not simply that your gun is made of a hard material?"

"…Right," Saya replied. "The high power output enabled by the LOBOS transition method is too unstable for a gun to withstand. So, as a way to regulate the output, part of it is diverted to a defensive energy field."

In the stall next to Kirin's, Saya was coarsely scrubbing her hair.

"That's why you can exchange so many blows against a close-range weapon." Still, Kirin felt that using the gun as a blunt weapon had to be outside its intended usage.

"…I couldn't have sparred with Ayato without something like that," Saya went on, as if she'd read Kirin's mind.

According to her, she had developed the skill in order to help with Ayato's training when they were children.

"So, you're not a student of the Amagiri Shinmei Style."

"Just monkey see, monkey do. Well, Ayato did teach me a little."

Kirin tried to imagine Ayato and Saya as children—which was easy enough, since they probably were not very different from now. Despite the fact that she was only imagining it, the scene made her a little jealous.

"…But Ayato and Julis are late," Saya remarked. The pair still had not arrived.

“They really are… But at least we had time to clean up,” Kirin said. They had no plans after their match, so they could just relax and wait.

“I’m getting out,” Saya said, shaking the water out of her hair like a small animal.

“Oh, Saya, you should dry off properly.” As Kirin tried to hand her a bath towel, Saya stopped and stared.

It would be more accurate to say that she was staring not at Kirin, but at her chest.

“Wh-what is it…?”

Kirin tried to back away, but before she could, Saya reached out.

“Eeek!” Kirin just barely managed to cover herself with one hand and knock Saya’s arm away with the other.

“Hmph,” Saya sulked.

“Wh-wha—What are you—?!”

On her guard, Kirin slowly backed away, but Saya closed in.

The fairly spacious shower room was still just a shower room. Kirin soon found herself trapped against a wall with nowhere to run.

Saya’s eyes gleamed with impure intentions as she waggled her fingers. “…It has been said since ancient times that kneading the breasts makes them grow larger.”

“That’s obviously wrong!”

Undeterred, Saya swiftly grabbed for her, but Kirin frantically whacked the groping hands aside. It almost looked like a sparring match. Kirin did have the advantage in close-range combat.

In the end, Saya, unable to lay one finger on Kirin, puffed out her cheeks in frustration. “…No fair.”

“I—I don’t think that’s…” Bewildered, Kirin wrapped her bath towel tightly around her body. “Anyway—You’ll catch a cold if you don’t dry off!”

As she opened the door to leave, an air-window suddenly opened.

It was the intercom for the waiting room. The video feed was one-way, so the visitor could only hear their voices.

“Sorry we’re late! Are you both still there?”

The air-window showed Ayato out of breath.

Beside him, Julis was also heaving her shoulders. “Damn those city guards. I never thought they’d be so persistent…”

Clearly, something *had* happened to them.

Julis and Ayato had access to the room, but that had been temporarily suspended while Saya and Kirin were in the shower.

And Kirin was only wearing a bath towel. She couldn’t greet them like this. “Um, we’re sorry, but could you wait a little—”

“Finally,” Saya interrupted. She called up the air console and promptly unlocked the room.

“Huh…?”

The door opened, so of course Ayato and Julis walked in.

“We’re really sorry. But we saw your match on the broadcast, and…”

“Honestly, I can’t believe it was so much trouble to get here…”

Each with one foot into the room, they froze in tandem.

Kirin, too, stiffened at the door to the showers.

Saya walked up to the two visitors as if nothing was awry and spoke with just a hint of pride. "…We won."

What followed, needless to say, was that Saya received a lengthy earful from Julis.

*

It was the fifth day of the Festa, and they were at Sirius Dome.

"So…" Julis stretched out onstage and looked back toward Ayato with a faint smile. "The first match was all you. Now it's my turn."

"Got it. I'll take it easy this round," Ayato replied with his own regretful smile, and patted her lightly on the back.

"All right, here we are, just about to start the second day of the Phoenix! For today's first bout here in Sirius Dome, we'd like to introduce a team who blasted straight through Round One—Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld from Seidoukan!"

"Round One was Amagiri's show for sure. Let's see how Round Two turns out. Looking forward to it."

Hearing the familiar voices of the announcer and commentator, Julis focused on her targets for the match.

It was a tag team consisting of the thirty-seventh and fifty-fourth ranked fighters from the Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies. One girl wore her hair in pigtails, and the other in a single ponytail. They both had exquisitely well-proportioned features.

Opinions differed on which school was the strongest in Asterisk, but Queenvale's reputation as the weakest was nearly unanimous. In the entire history of Asterisk, Queenvale had finished in first place in the overall Festa standings only once.

But their lack of prowess had little to no bearing on their popularity. In terms of the sheer number of fans, Queenvale had maintained a high standing since its founding. Queenvale did not concentrate on the overall score in the Festa, but rather viewed the Festa as a stage for highlighting the most attractive aspects of their students. Hence their popularity.

It was the only all-female institution of the six, as well as the smallest. It had unique standards for matriculation, famed for its

low rate of admission. Queenvale was an academy of goddesses who sought the ideal through beauty and strength.

"Good grief, those are some cheers," Julis muttered as she activated the Aspera Spina.

As usual, the audience was loud enough to break the dome, or so it seemed. But most of the noise was clearly in support of Queenvale.

"Thanks, everyone!"

"We'll give it our best shot!"

The two fighters from Queenvale beamed at the crowd, waving with both hands.

The girl in pigtails held activated twin-sword Luxes, while the one in a ponytail held a spear-type Lux. Contrary to their dainty appearance, they left no gaps in their defenses, and showed fine control over their prana.

Queenvale may have been the weakest school as a whole, but that had more to do with their practice of very careful selection, which resulted in rarely filling all the slots allotted to their school in the Festa. It did not mean that individual students were poor fighters.

Corroborating this was the fact that Queenvale's top-ranked student had come in second at the previous Lindvolus tournament.

"Don't you interfere, Ayato," Julis said.

"I know."

She stepped forward, composed and confident. The school crests declared the start of the match.

"Here we go!" The girl in pigtails was the first to make a move. She sliced at Julis, but Julis easily parried with her rapier.

"This is nothing compared to Ayato's or Kirin's swordplay," she said to herself.

The girl with the ponytail jumped in with a yell, but Julis did not allow her to get close.

In the few weeks of her training, the area where Julis had improved the most was, beyond question, how she handled herself in close combat. She wasn't yet good enough to hold her own when fencing Ayato or Kirin, but she could handle ordinary opponents with ease, even if there were two—just as she was doing now.

Although her main strength was long-distance attacks, her skills with the rapier had always been decent. She had been instructed in the basics from an early age.

“Take this!” cried the girl with the sword.

“Burst into bloom—*Anthurium!*”

The girl executed a sharp thrust, but a shield of fire instantly materialized to deflect it. She was knocked back with a scream.

“Oh—Are you okay?!” The one in pigtails rushed to her aid.

Julis took advantage of the pause to leap back, putting distance between them.

“Now you’ll see what I can do.”

Mana stirred around her. “O flames of Trocchia, fly over the castle walls and burn away the Nine Plagues…,” she intoned. Flames rose up and swirled to form around her nine fireballs in the shapes of delicate primroses.

“Burst into bloom—*Primrose!*”

At her command, the flames dancing around her like fireflies surged at the pair from Queenvale.

Unable to withstand the omnidirectional attack, the girl in the ponytail cried out as her crest shattered.

As her own emblem announced her partner’s defeat, the girl in pigtails dodged the fireballs and sliced them away one by one.

“Hah! This won’t take me down…!” she boldly declared, and cut down the last one, but—

“Blossom—*Semiserrata!*”

A magic circle appeared below the girl’s feet.

“Wha—?”

A fixed ability—which was to say, a trap.

Julis had used the fireballs to deftly lure the girl to that very spot.

An enormous camellia flower made of flame opened up above the girl as she stared, stunned, toward the sky.

“What even *is* that?!” In a panic, she began to run—but it was too late.

The flower of fire exploded on impact, engulfing her.

“*End of battle! Winners—Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!*” the mechanical voice announced.

The roaring gust and whirling flames eventually subsided to reveal the girl lying on her back, unconscious.

“A-and there you have it—another one-sided match! This time, it

was Riessfeld's one-woman show! My, my… I can only say that there's more to see from this *pair! The Phoenix is, of course, a tag team tournament, but they have yet to fight together… What do you make of it?"*

"Well, it's a pretty effective strategy for not showing your hand as a tag team. And there is some precedent, so. But I was impressed with Riessfeld. Now there's a clever fighter. Her ability is so versatile, she can respond to a wide range of situations. That's a point in her favor for sure. Particularly that move at the end there…"

The keen-eyed commentator explained in detail how Julis had led her opponent into her trap.

"Not bad, I guess," Julis said, letting out a short breath.

"Good work, Julis." Ayato greeted her with a grin, raising his hand.

She returned the smile and met the high five, making a bright, pleasant *slap*.

*

"Honestly! Don't they know when to stop? Just one stupid question after another…"

Returning to the waiting room after another dragged-out winners' interview, Julis sank into the sofa with a sigh.

"Well, they're just doing their jobs." With a nervous laugh, Ayato turned on the kettle to make tea. "Oh, there was something I noticed in the match today…"

"Hmm?"

"Do you always do incantations with your spells, Julis?" He was thinking of the mystical lines she'd spoken before using her Primrose.

"Oh, that. Well, you know, it was just a little something I threw in for the fans. I hear that's the sort of thing they love."

"Huh." This surprised Ayato. He had thought Julis would be the last person to indulge fans that way.

"No need to be so surprised. I know my role here. When I'm onstage, I can give them that much. Well, when I can afford to, anyway." She shrugged. "What it takes to activate one's abilities varies from person to person. In theory, there's no need to vocalize or gesture, but some people need to go through certain motions. For

my part, I don't need incantations, but vocalizing makes it easier to *image* my powers."

"I see…"

Julis sipped her tea and gave Ayato a pointed look. "Anyway, you name your techniques aloud, too."

"Oh, that's just an old habit. When Saya and I used to train together as kids, she told me it was cooler that way…and then it kind of stuck."

"Hmm. So that's why."

Because he was forbidden as a child from sparring with other students, the only people who could help him train were Saya and his older sister. And because they could not do so at the dojo, they usually went up into the nearby hills and used low-level Luxes meant for self-defense.

Thinking back on it now, it was not very far removed from ordinary playing, which could have been why his father overlooked it.

"So, what do you want to do now?" Julis asked with a cup in her hand.

Ayato crossed his arms to think. "Hmm. Well, I'd *like* to go root for Saya and Kirin…but we wouldn't make it in time, would we."

"Yes, their match would probably be over by the time we get there."

Saya and Kirin were not with them today, since they had their own fight.

The first round was held over four days, but the second round took two days, and the third round would conclude in just one day. So unless they were at the same arena or their matches happened to be scheduled at very different times, it was difficult to go watch their friends.

"B-besides, we haven't eaten lunch yet," Julis added stiffly.

"Oh yeah, you're right."

Due to the timing of their match, they had put off lunch. Ayato had not paid it much mind until Julis reminded him and the hunger came on suddenly. The human body works in mysterious ways.

"Well then, maybe we should stop somewhere for a bite…," Ayato began, until Julis cleared her throat in an oddly theatrical manner. "Julis?"

"Um… So, actually—the thing is… I did bring something today." Julis went to the locker and retrieved a large basket.

“Oh… Did you pack us lunch?”

“Y-yes. Well, you could say that.” Bashfully averting her gaze, Julis pushed the basket toward him.

Ayato had spent many days off with Julis for training and other things, but he could not remember her doing something like this. Even at school, Julis tended to eat at the cafeteria—of course, students who packed their own lunches were in the minority—and she had never cooked or made food that he knew about.

Then it hit him. “Oh—Is this because Saya and Kirin made lunch the other day?”

Julis was competitive to the core, so maybe that had triggered something inside her.

“N-no, that has nothing to do with it!” she denied, going crimson. “I did this—on a whim! Yes, that’s it.”

“Oh, okay.” Ayato laughed. “Well, thanks, whatever the reason. I think I’ll dig in.”

“It… It’s very simple. Don’t get your expectations up too high,” Julis stressed.

Answering with a weak smile, Ayato opened the basket to find a row of adorably small tea sandwiches.

“Oh, sandwiches.” They were standard fare, like ham and lettuce, eggs, bacon. He picked up an egg sandwich and took a bite.

“H-how is it?” Julis asked with visible uncertainty.

“Mm. Pretty good.” This was no less than his honest opinion.

Ayato did not often eat sandwiches and had little basis for comparison, but it was the type of thing he liked. The black pepper was a nice touch.

“Oh—good!” Joy immediately spread over her face, but she turned away to hide it as soon as she noticed him looking at her.

“I didn’t know you cooked, too, Julis.”

“Well, something like this is easy enough.”

Even with her back to him, he could see pride straighten her spine.

She really could be very cute sometimes.

“Are you going to have any?”

There were clearly too many sandwiches in the basket for him to finish on his own. This had to be a portion for two, Ayato thought, but Julis showed no signs of partaking.

“Well, sure, I will, but…” The unspoken half of the sentence weighed down on her.

Confused, Ayato tried to imagine what she wanted to say but couldn’t think of anything.

This went on for a bit, until Julis grew impatient and her glare became sullen. “…It’s not very fair, you know.”

“Fair?”

“Well, um… To do that to Sasamiya and Toudou but not to me seems, well, inconsistent… Er, not that I particularly want you to do anything, but…,” Julis mumbled vaguely.

Finally, Ayato realized—Could she be talking about *that*?

“Oh, is that it…? You too, Julis?”

The color in her cheeks high, Julis briskly turned away, but she did not deny it.

“W-well then, um, if I may…”

Ayato lightly placed his hand on top of her head and petted it gently. A scent of flowers softly tickled his nose. Alone in the room with her, he felt a little embarrassed.

Julis appeared to share the sentiment; her already red cheeks blushed redder still.

How long have I been doing this? In their mutual silence, Ayato had a poor grasp of time and had no idea when he should stop.

“I know! We should check on the other matches while we finish lunch…!” After a moment, Julis abruptly changed the subject and turned on the television.

“Oh, yeah. It looked like there would be lots of interesting matches today.” Taking the hint, Ayato pulled back his hand but did not know what to do with it.

Coming up empty, he reached for another sandwich. Just as tasty as the last.

“Oh…” Julis flipped through the channels until her finger froze in place. “So, *their* match is today, too.”

Hearing the gravity in her voice, Ayato looked up at the screen to see a male student built like a boulder bulging under a Seidoukan uniform.

The fighter facing him was a female student from Le Wolfe wielding an enormous scythe.

*

“Don’t rush in. Got it, Randy?”

With the Bardiche-Leo in his hands, Lester MacPhail called to Randy Hooke behind him.

“I know, Lester. We’re going to stall them as much as possible. Right?”

“Right. Just keep ’em at bay. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Stalling for time was an atypical strategy for him, but he had little choice. Their opponent was ranked third at Le Wolfe. Much as he hated to admit it, she was far stronger.

“Hey there—Lester, was it?” Irene Urzaiz casually addressed him.

Although the match had already started, she hadn’t even bothered to take a fighting stance. Her huge scythe, the Gravisheath, still rested on her shoulder.

“What do you want?” Lester cautiously kept his distance.

If there was one thing he had learned in the recent past—specifically, from his bitter defeats—it was that discretion might be the better part of valor.

“You’re a friend of the Murakumo’s, right? There’s some luck. You wanna tell me about him?”

“Huh?” Lester scowled at the unexpected question.

“It’s not like I’m super-interested but, you know, since we’re here.”

“I’ve got no idea why you’d wanna know, but lemme clear up a couple things. First, I only happen to go to the same school as him. I’m not his friend,” Lester said, disgusted, then repositioned the Bardiche-Leo and pointed it toward Irene. “And second, I came here for a fight, not some stupid chitchat.”

“Heh… Yeah, okay. Sorry.” Irene shrugged, then spun the Gravisheath around and slammed its butt against the ground. “Well then, if you that’s what you want, let’s get started.”

Irene bared her teeth in a grin, and the Gravisheath roared like a wild beast.

“Randy, run!” Lester shouted, and began to run himself. But he did not charge in recklessly. He skirted around his opponent from the right, maintaining distance and waiting for an opening.

Irene’s Gravisheath was a powerful Orga Lux with the ability to control gravity. However, that didn’t mean there was no hope of defeating her.

First of all, that ability was widely known, which made it possible to form a strategy against it. The Gravisheath’s power could not target a specific object, but only an area. That meant its target could avoid its power by staying constantly on the move.

Second, the Gravisheath’s biggest weakness was how much energy it took to wield. Orga Luxes were generally known to have some side effects—a “cost”—and in the case of the Gravisheath, the cost was particularly vicious. This was why it had passed through the hands of so many students with only a few able to use it fully.

That means if I can drag this out, we’ve got the advantage!

Lester’s usual style was to strike first and strike hard, but that wouldn’t work here, and there was nothing to be done. After all, winning was the most important thing.

If there was one cause for concern, it was Irene’s partner, Priscilla. She was backed up against the corner of the stage, showing no sign of making a move. She followed Irene with anxious eyes, but nothing more.

There was almost no data on Priscilla, but seeing how she had behaved in just the same way in the first round, she did not seem to be a proactive fighter. It was possible that she had some sort of ability—perhaps as a Strega with the power to attack from a long distance or defend her partner—but for now, Lester thought it was

enough to keep an eye on her.

"Jeez… Everybody always tries the same damn thing. Don't you have a shred of originality?" Irene looked supremely irritated as she swung the Gravisheath with one hand. The purple urm-manadite shone brighter, enough to illuminate the floor of the stage. "Besides, you're not even good enough to pull it off."

"Guh!" Randy, who had been running around Irene opposite Lester, suddenly fell to the ground.

It looked as if an invisible hand was pinning him down, and his face contorted in pain. Irene must have strengthened the gravitational field around him.

"Randy!" Lester cried out.

"See, what'd I tell ya? You can scurry around all you want, but all I have to do is to set the area a little wider—and then it's all over." With that, Irene swung the Gravisheath again. This time the purple light gathered around the fallen Randy.

Randy groaned in agony. Apparently, narrowing the area of the effect made the gravitational field more intense.

"I don't think so!" While Irene fixated on Randy, Lester closed in behind her and brought down the Bardiche-Leo. But—

"Didn't I tell you? No creativity." Irene used the Gravisheath as a pole to vault into the air, dodging Lester's attack while landing a sharp and forceful kick to his neck.

As Lester went down on his knee with a grunt, Irene struck with another kick to his stomach, sending his enormous body flying.

"I'll get to you in a bit. Hold on tight," Irene said as she sauntered over to Randy.

"Stop—You…!" Lester croaked.

Irene ignored him and spoke to the prone young man. "Wanna give up?"

"N-never…!"

Irene coldly towered over him as he struggled to speak. At his reply, she let out a short sigh and swung the Gravisheath nonchalantly. Its purple glow intensified even further as Randy tensed up, voiceless.

His efforts to push himself off the ground failed. His arms went limp, and the emblem on his chest announced—

"Randy Hooke—unconscious."

“One down.” Irene turned her eyes on Lester, who had just managed to stand up. “Wow. You’re pretty tough, Ax of the Roaring Distance.”

“Your mistake, if you think I’m not…!” Lester focused prana into the Bardiche-Leo, where it reacted with the manadite for an explosive burst of energy.

It was his Meteor Arts technique, Blast Nemea.

“Take this!”

He delivered a stroke with his ax of light, twice the usual size.

Irene blocked it with the Gravisheath, but it was impossible to fend off completely. She was sent flying backward.

“How’d you like that?!” Lester was confident that the raw power of the Blast Nemea had no equal at Seidoukan. Even if it was not a direct hit, he was sure he had dealt her some damage.

“Ouuuch… Guess I did take you a bit too lightly. You’re not ninth at Seidoukan for nothing. ” But Irene got back on her feet with only a slight grimace.

Did she actually jump back to soften the impact…?!

Her earlier kicks and this latest defensive maneuver spoke to some extraordinary skills in physical combat. “So… There’s more to you than just the fancy weapon.”

Focusing his mind anew, Lester re-established his distance from Irene. Losing Randy hurt, but things were still going according to plan. If he kept forcing her to use her ability, she would hit a wall. All he had to do was hold out…

“*Tch.* I didn’t wanna show my hand before the main tournament, but…guess that’s what I gotta do,” Irene said. “Out of respect for your strength, I’ll let you see my full power for a bit.”

“What—?” Lester scowled.

He knew, more or less, the power of the Gravisheath. It could intensify the gravitational field in an area to push down an opponent, or control the direction of gravity’s pull. Although there were probably many ways to utilize it, as far as he knew that was the extent of her weapon’s power.

Is she bluffing…? he thought.

Ignoring Lester’s suspicious glare, Irene walked toward Priscilla and gently drew her close.

“Irene…”

“Sorry, Priscilla. I’ll only take a little.”

Irene opened her mouth wide. Two long, sharp canines glowed

eerily, and she sunk them deep into Priscilla's neck.

"What the—?!"

As Lester stood stunned, the Gravisheath glowed brightly in Irene's hand, like it was throbbing with joy.

Irene released her bite and softly exhaled. Blood trickled down to stain Priscilla's chest, but stopped before long. The small bite wounds on her neck closed as Lester watched.

"See, the Gravisheath demands *blood* as the cost for its powers. It's not exactly fuel-efficient, so it would drain you bone-dry in no time, normally. That's why it transforms the body of the user to take the cost from an outside source. A real scary Orga Lux, don't ya think?" With a chuckle, Irene readied the scythe. "But I'm told the transformation only occurs if you have a pretty high compatibility rating."

"I see… So you're literally a vampire." Lester couldn't hide the shock on his face, but he could not retreat, either. He held up the Bardiche-Leo and focused his prana, intending to launch a Meteor Arts counterattack.

"Okay, then. Here goes!" Irene swung the Gravisheath, and deep-purple spheres appeared. There were three, about an armful in size, floating in the air around Irene. "Go—*Tres Fanega!*"

The spheres rushed at Lester.

As he tried to dodge them, he was astonished to find he could barely move. His body felt as heavy as if he'd been tied down with lead weights.

"I went ahead and made the gravity a little stronger on you. Oh, and the area of effect is the entire stage. There's no getting away."

"Ngh!" Lester barely dodged the first sphere but had to receive the second and the third with the Bardiche-Leo.

And as he did, the spheres shrunk down, swallowing the Bardiche-Leo with them, and burst into nothing.

Irene laughed. "If you want to block my gravity spheres, you gotta at least bring an Orga Lux."

"Dammit!" He had no chance fighting her unarmed.

The moment he reached for the backup Lux at his waist, he felt the downward pull increase.

Bellowing in pain, he was dragged to the ground, and his body creaked against a gravitational field so strong it seemed he would break through the arena floor.

“So, you wanna keep going, Ax of the Roaring Distance?”

Lester felt the blade of the Gravisheath come to rest against his neck. He couldn’t even get any words out, but he glared at Irene with clenched teeth.

He wanted to at least land one blow. But those eyes staring down at him turned his blood cold.

They were glinting with an icy light—something inhuman.

If he were to resist now, Irene would not hesitate to reap his head with that scythe.

Of course, doing so would result in her immediate disqualification. But the savagery he saw told him she didn’t care.

Letting out a heavy breath, he muttered, “All right. You win.”

“End of battle! Winners—Irene Urzaiz and Priscilla Urzaiz!”

At the automated announcement, Lester ground his molars.

CHAPTER 5
THE SISTERS FROM LE WOLFE

In the Sirius Dome, on the seventh day of the Phoenix—

"End of battle! Winner: Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!"

As Ayato and Julis both put away their weapons, cheering engulfed the arena.

"Wow, are these two strong! After dominating Rounds One and Two, Team Amagiri-Riessfeld has advanced to the main tournament from Block C!"

"Another landslide victory today. Can't wait to see what they'll show us in the main tournament"

Their opponents for the third round were from Jie Long. Ayato and Julis took on one student each and finished off their individual opponents almost simultaneously.

Although the fight did not go as smoothly as the first and second rounds, their win was still a complete victory.

"Well, we got through the preliminary matches," Ayato said with a sigh.

"Yes, so far so good. But the real fight is up ahead," Julis said.

Because the bracket prevented tournament favorites from facing one another in the preliminaries, it actually wasn't too difficult for those teams to reach the main rounds.

However, starting with the fourth round, the high-ranked teams would go head-to-head. The competition was about to get much more fierce.

“There don’t seem to be any surprises in this year’s tournament, so the top team from each school should make it to the main tournament. The rest is up to the bracket,” Julis said, looking serious, as they walked from the stage to the press conference room.

“Which is being announced tomorrow, right? I hope we don’t face Saya and Kirin right away.”

A new bracket would be drawn up for Round Four and beyond, but unlike the preliminary rounds, this one would be random.

They were scheduled for a complete day of rest tomorrow. The only Festa event would be the bracket lottery, to be drawn by representatives from each school.

“I agree about Sasamiya and Toudou. I wouldn’t want to face the Puppets from Allekant too soon, either. I want to learn as much as we can about them first.”

Saya and Kirin, as well as Ardy and Rimcy, had already advanced to the main tournament.

“I’d also rather not face the Jie Long twins or the knights from Gallardworth. And, well…then there’s Lamilexia.” Something grim made its way into her voice.

Irene and Priscilla, who had defeated Lester and Randy, had yet to fight in Round Three—but they were sure to advance to the main tournament.

“I never imagined she was that powerful,” Julis went on. “To be honest, I don’t think I stand a chance against her one-on-one. What about you?”

“Hmm. In a pure close-range fight, maybe.”

A scythe was not a particularly good weapon to begin with. Its variety of attacks was limited, which made it easy to defend against. Irene seemed able to compensate for that shortcoming with her combat skills—or rather, her innate physical abilities. If it came down to a fight at close range, Ayato definitely had the advantage, given his superior technique.

Still, since the scythe was also an Orga Lux, there was no telling just how effective the Ser Veresta would be. To win, he would have to do more than wave a sword around.

“As far as I can tell from the data, the effects of the Gravisheath’s power differ from user to user,” Julis said. “I don’t think she’d be able to do anything drastic at close range, but…”

Which was to say, the high gravitational field would crush Irene, too, if she stepped into it.

The Gravisheath itself, however, seemed immune to its own powers. She could probably use it to attack without making herself vulnerable.

"But the biggest concern is her sister," Julis muttered as they continued down the hallway. "A regenerative, of all things."

The term referred to a type of Dante or Strega who could heal their own wounds. Although not as rare as healers, who could cure the injuries of others, this ability was considered to be one of the most uncommon.

"Regeneratives can have just about any type of supportive power, but she seems to be extraordinary. If she can not only heal injuries but also restore lost blood, that would place her in the top tier. She can probably even regenerate lost body parts. Talk about an ace in the hole."

Those with special powers were required by law to register with their countries, and that information was shared and publicized worldwide. However, there were some countries whose governments, for any number of reasons, could not properly collect or disseminate the data. Irene and Priscilla were from such a country.

"So that's how she deals with the disadvantage of the Gravisheath's high energy cost… Really, I don't know whether to be appalled or impressed."

In any case, this meant that the most significant weakness of the Gravisheath did not apply to Irene.

"No matter," Julis said curtly. "There's nothing we can do until the bracket is announced tomorrow. Oh, speaking of which—Do you have any plans tomorrow?"

"I was thinking of going to watch the lottery in person…"

"How very touristy of you."

Tomorrow was their day off, so they had no training planned. Claudia, who was participating in the drawing, had invited Ayato to come along.

"What about you, Julis?"

"A lot of chores from home have been piling up. I was going to spend the day making some calls and taking care of paperwork," she replied, utterly unenthused, before she abruptly stopped walking.

Ayato automatically paused in response, and she turned to him. "I don't think I need to tell you this every time, but—please stay out

of trouble, will you?”

*

The lottery for the bracket was held at the Sirius Dome, which had by now become quite familiar to Ayato.

“Good day, Ayato. Thank you for coming.”

They were in a private suite, close to the stage but partitioned off from the general seating. Once Ayato arrived at the site, following Claudia’s directions, she greeted him with a smile.

“I had no idea there were seats like these,” he remarked.

The space was not very large, but with only a few seats, it felt quite open and relaxed. There was no one else here, so the two had the place all to themselves.

“This suite is reserved for the Seidoukan student council. Please.” Claudia indicated a seat, and Ayato took it. She sat down next to him and inclined her head. “First of all, congratulations on advancing to the main tournament.”

“Oh, um—thanks.” Flustered, Ayato returned the bow.

“I’m looking forward to your performance in the main tournament. Please do your best for our school.”

“I’ll do everything I can. All the other teams are amazing, though. It looks like it’ll be tough.”

“Well, all the teams advancing really are truly skilled fighters,” Claudia said with a laugh. “But the way I see it, there are not many teams that can go toe-to-toe with you and Julis. That’s why this lottery is so important. There’s quite a responsibility on my shoulders.”

“Oh, yeah… Is it okay for you to be in here?”

Claudia was supposed to draw the lottery for Seidoukan. Ayato wondered if she had time for this leisurely chat.

“The drawing is the very last thing to happen. There will be speeches by bigwigs and a summary of the preliminary rounds—a lot of boring things, really.”

As they spoke, someone presumably from the Executive Committee was babbling energetically on a large screen. The speech seemed to be explaining the trends of this Phoenix and its previous season, but nothing of particular interest.

Still, the seats appeared to be just as packed as they were for

the matches.

Most of the audience were only there for the lottery, too. Very few paid attention to the speech.

"At any rate—it's been quite a while since we've been alone like this, Ayato."

"Huh…?" Ayato tensed up as Claudia drew her body toward his.

"I've been so busy with work, and Julis and the others have had you all to themselves… I've been lonesome, you know." She took his arm and pressed herself even closer.

"Well, um… That's—" Ayato grew more nervous as Claudia pushed her soft, ample chest against him. At the same time, a terribly fine, sweet fragrance tickled his nose.

And with impeccable timing, his mobile rang. "Oh—Sorry, Claudia!"

He thanked his luck as he separated himself from her to open an air-window. Kirin was on the other end, eyebrows upturned with worry.

"H-hi, Ayato. I'm sorry to call you like this…!"

"Is something wrong?"

Kirin was visibly flustered. Something unexpected must have happened.

As Ayato leaned toward the screen out of concern, Kirin continued nervously. *"Um, well, I came to the commercial area today with Saya, but—all of a sudden, I just can't find her anywhere…"*

"Oh… I see." Ayato could already tell what had happened, but he let her continue anyway.

"And I called her on her mobile device, and she says she got lost! I —I don't know what to do."

"Got it. I can help you look, so let's meet up first. Where are you now?"

"Th-thank you so much! Right now, I'm……"

Once they had agreed on a rendezvous point, he hung up.

Kirin, at least, was not far from where he was, so they would be able to meet up quickly.

The problem was Saya, whose sense of direction was truly abysmal.

Once, when they were in elementary school, she had completely disappeared after going out to get some juice. When he called her, she had made her way over a mountain and into a

neighboring town. Ayato doubted she had left Asterisk this time, but she could be literally anywhere in the city.

“Sorry, Claudia. Well, you heard that, so…” Ayato swiveled back toward Claudia and jumped slightly.

She was scowling darkly at him.

“Um, Claudia…?”

Ayato had never seen her like this. It left him completely nonplussed.

She was always smiling, so calm, and in control…

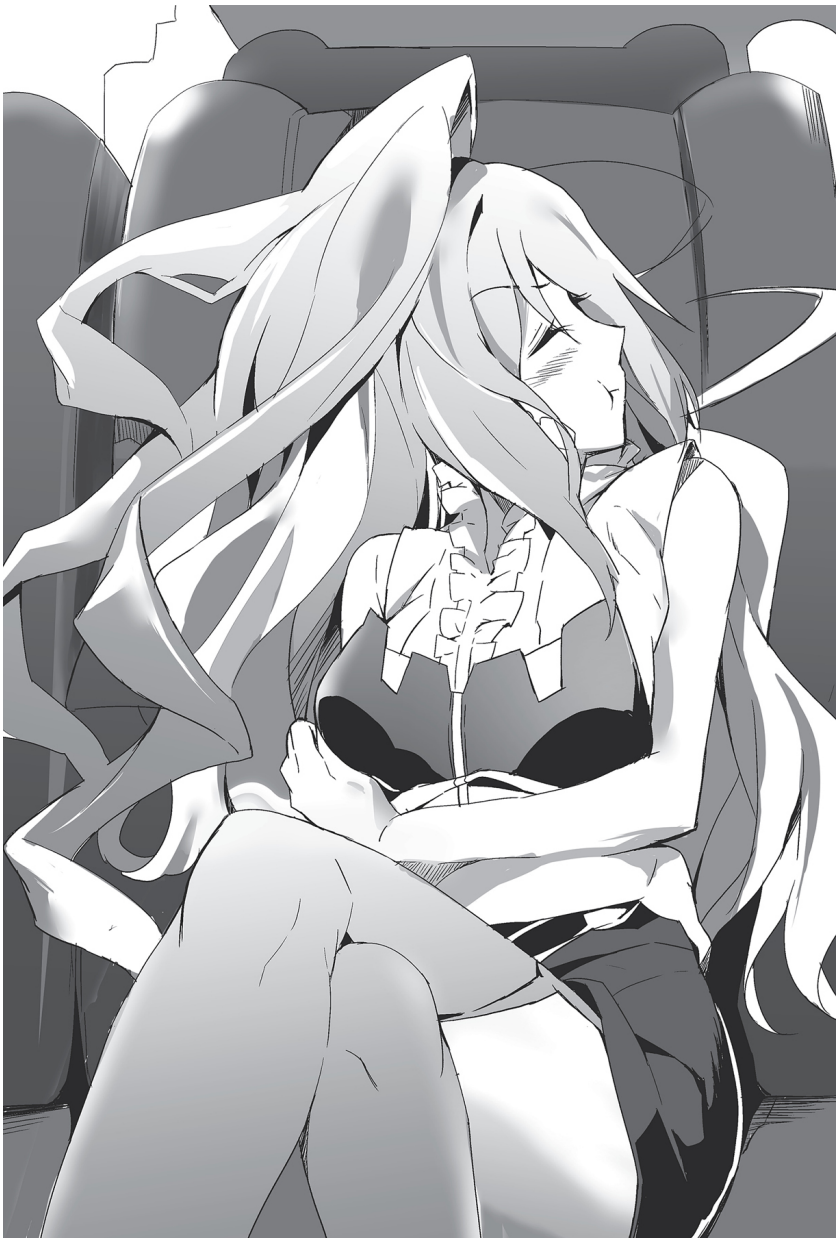
“We were finally going to get some time together.” Her tone was accusatory and somewhat childish.

Or rather, it was appropriate for her actual age.

“I was really looking forward to this, you know.”

“Um—Well, I…,” he mumbled vaguely, having no idea what to do.

Claudia turned away in a huff.



“I-I’m really sorry! I’ll make it up to you, I promise!” Ayato apologized in distress, but Claudia maintained her silence and posture.

He was about to put his head in his hands and give up on this unsolvable crisis when he suddenly noticed her shoulders were shaking slightly with suppressed laughter. “Oh…”

“I do beg your pardon.” She giggled, and turned with her tongue stuck out at him. “That was cruel of me.”

“Come on, Claudia, don’t do that.” Ayato almost crumpled to the floor.

She turned her usual serene smile on him. “Please forgive me. I really was looking forward to this.”

Ayato winced with guilt.

“Still, you can’t leave Miss Sasamiya lost in the streets,” she went on gently, and opened the door for him. “But you will make it up to me, won’t you? I’ll hold you to that.”

“Yes, ma’am.” With a tired smile, Ayato left the suite to hurry toward the subway station.

*

“Let’s see. She should be around here somewhere, I think,” Ayato said, getting his bearings in the cityscape.

They were in west Asterisk, at the outskirts of the commercial area. After meeting up with Kirin and calling Saya’s mobile, he had narrowed her location to this neighborhood.

“We’ll have to look for her on foot from here.”

“I suppose so,” Kirin said, head swiveling this way and that.

Ayato had told Saya to stay put, so he hoped the situation wouldn’t deteriorate further. “We should split up. We have to find her before it gets dark.”

“Right. I’ll go look that way.”

“Thanks, Kirin.”

“Sure!” She bowed politely to him, trotted to the other side of the road, and vanished into the streets.

Even in the middle of the Festa, there were few tourists so close to the redevelopment area. Ayato did see several characters who

looked like trouble, but he attributed that to their proximity to Le Wolfe.

He wondered then whether splitting up with Kirin was the best idea, but there couldn't be many who stood a chance against her. Her reputation as a former first-ranked student preceded her. He doubted anyone would be foolish enough to start a fight with her.

The problem was Saya. He was worried that she might get into some kind of altercation—specifically, that she would start one.

Of course, his concern extended mainly to the other party.

Holding back was not in Saya's nature. The more he considered that, the more it seemed like the right decision to split up and look for her.

"From what I could tell on the air-window, she didn't seem to be on a major street," he muttered. "So, I guess I have to check the back streets one by one…"

Letting out a sigh, Ayato went into a nearby alley. It was somewhat damp, dimly lit, with few pedestrians.

He kept walking for a bit, but nothing changed. Just as he decided to double back, he thought he heard someone talking in the shadows up ahead.

He stopped still and strained his ears.

"Don't… Please…! …me go…!"

This time, he heard it for sure. And it sounded like trouble.

He crept forward to observe and saw a girl behind a building, surrounded by several men.

That's—

To Ayato's surprise, he recognized both parties.

The girl was Priscilla Urzaiz. The men were the ones from that brawl with Irene.

Ayato could guess what was going on here.

"Hey, quit making so much noise. We hate extra work."

"That's right. And don't blame us for this. Blame your sister."

"Mmf! Mmmm!" The men's hands muffled Priscilla's screams. They had her hands pinned, too. There were five assailants in all.

Judging from their brawl the other day, Ayato could take any one of them without releasing his strength. But it was not so simple with five. Plus, handling this with force was out of the question to begin with. If he got involved in trouble and street fights, he wouldn't be able to show his face to Julis. And if it resulted in him getting disqualified from the Festa—there would be no way to ever

make that up to her.

But he could hardly just walk away.

Not much of a choice, Ayato thought with a sigh. He emerged from the shadows with deliberately loud footsteps.

"Wh-who the hell are you?!" One of the men noticed Ayato and activated a knife-type Lux—an unexpectedly quick reaction.

"Oh, nobody, I'm just passing by… But do you think maybe you could let that girl go?"

"What?!" Their eyes all fixed on him at once.

They didn't seem the type for rational conversation.

"You got some balls, kid, bargin' in like this and tellin' us what to do."

Glaring at Ayato, the other men activated their Luxes one by one.

Then suddenly, one pointed at Ayato's face and shouted, "Whoa! Isn't that the Murakumo?!"

"The Murakumo— You mean Seidoukan's first-ranked?"

"This goofy-lookin' brat? You sure?"

For a moment, doubt crossed their faces.

Ayato did not miss the opportunity.

Catching them off guard, he slipped between them to Priscilla, where she was held against the wall. He grabbed her hand and ran at full speed, pulling her deeper into the alley.

"Hey! You little bastard—!"

The man who had been holding Priscilla reached out at them, but too late.

"Um—I—!" she began.

"Just run!" Ayato told her.

The men gave chase with angry shouts. Explanations could wait.

Ayato had thought that the twisting alleyways would be ideal for throwing off pursuers, but in reality it was the opposite. He was practically as lost as Saya in this part of town, while the men seemed to know these alleys like the backs of their hands.

"Go around from the right! We can trap them in a dead end!"

"Contact the boss! Ask him to send a few more guys!"

The shouts came from more than one direction. They were apparently being herded toward the redevelopment area. "This could have gone better…"

If he broke his seal now, it might affect him tomorrow and

beyond. Since their match was not until the day after tomorrow, he would have some time to recover, but he wanted to avoid that if possible.

He might not have a choice, though.

Priscilla interrupted the thoughts running through his mind with a tug on his shirt.

Wordlessly, she pointed upward.

"Up…? Oh—right!"

Grasping what she meant, he rounded a corner and released his strength just for a moment. Paying no mind to the sharp pain that shot through his body, he drew Priscilla close and kicked off the wall to climb up a building.

There were few tall structures in this area. This one was only four stories high.

"Hey, where'd they go?!"

"Find them! They can't have gone far!"

From below, Ayato could still hear them. As he stood on the roof, stifling his breath, the men loudly doubled back. He exhaled in relief.

They would probably figure out how he and Priscilla had escaped, but he decided on staying still for the time being. Luckily, a water tower and other obstacles would provide cover, perfect for hiding.

"Uh, um…" Priscilla awkwardly groped for words, and Ayato realized he had been holding on to her all this time.

"Oh—s-sorry!" He hastily let go.

"No, please don't apologize! You saved me! Thank you so much!" Priscilla bowed deeply, then took out her mobile. "Um… Would you mind if I call my sister?"

"Oh, no, go ahead."

With a nod, Priscilla started to fiddle with the device. Ayato figured she must have been adjusting the air-window and volume to prevent discovery.

Ayato searched for any signs of others in the area. If he strained his ears, he could still hear angry voices in the distance. But things were quiet near them.

Unnaturally so.

What's going on…?

Of course, that was preferable to being chased by a gang, but something about it felt strange. He needed to keep his mind sharp.

“Um, Mr. Amagiri…?” Priscilla said timidly.

“Oh, sorry.” Ayato smiled at her. “Were you able to get in touch with your sister?”

She nodded, looking reassured. “Yes! She’s on her way to pick me up.”

“Good. We can breathe easy then.”

The truly proper thing to do would have been to contact the city guard, but Ayato assumed Priscilla must have known that, too. If she had decided to contact just her sister, then Ayato was not going to press her about it.

“So… What led to all that?” Ayato asked. He had a rough idea of what had occurred, but not the details.

“Those men are from a casino in the Rotlicht—I think.”

“The Rotlicht?”

“Oh— There’s a part of the redevelopment area full of illegal businesses. That’s what people call it.”

“Huh…” So that was what went on in the redevelopment area? The central district had plenty of legal casinos. If the casinos in the Rotlicht operated illegally, they must have had reasons.

“And these guys from the casino… Why were they after you?”

“W-well… My sister caused a big brawl there some time ago. I hear she nearly destroyed the place,” Priscilla explained with downcast eyes, apparently ashamed. The latter half of her explanation became so faint it was barely audible.

Still, Ayato understood her perfectly well.

The men had tried to get back at Irene for wrecking their casino. But, finding themselves no match for her, they went after her sister, Priscilla, instead. That seemed to be the gist of it.

“B-but please don’t get the wrong idea! Sis—I mean, Irene is a little violent and short-tempered, for sure, but she’s really a very nice person!” Priscilla waved emphatically as she defended Irene.

Ayato could sense the affection Priscilla had for her sister, and it made him smile.

“Okay.” He laughed and held out his hand. “I’m Ayato Amagiri, by the way. Although I guess you knew that already.”

“I’m Priscilla Urzaiz. I’m sorry my sister was so rude to you the other day.” She smiled awkwardly as she shook his hand.

They were, after all, both on teams favored to win the Phoenix. It was impossible that they wouldn’t know of each other.

“I should really be able to fend for myself in a situation like

that—but I'm just not as strong as her," Priscilla said sadly.

True, while Priscilla was a Genestella, she hardly seemed to have any fighting experience.

In fact, talking to her in person, Ayato doubted her personality could handle conflict of any kind.

"Then why did you choose to fight in the Phoenix?"

"Um, well…," Priscilla hesitantly began.

"Hey, what the hell d'you think you're doing?!"

Hearing that harsh voice behind him, Ayato felt a ferocious wave of murderous intent. He whipped around in a fighting stance.

Irene Urzaiz stood there with the Gravisheath in her hands, floating in midair.

"Irene!"

"I sure hope you haven't laid a finger on Priscilla." Her eyes were shadowed with hostility and suspicion.

"H-he didn't! I told you earlier! Mr. Amagiri saved me!" Priscilla rushed to explain.

Irene was apparently in no mood to hear it. "You be quiet, Priscilla. Why would Ayato Amagiri save you? Aren't you suspicious? He's got no reason to help you. Actually, he's our enemy, so it woulda made more sense if he just walked away."

She glared at Ayato with eyes as deep and dark as falling dusk.

"Your enemy?" he said. "Well, maybe in the arena, but not *now*."

"*Heh!* Such noble words. You're not gonna fool me!" Irene spat as she alighted on the roof and slowly raised the Gravisheath. "I don't know what you're up to, but I'll make you regret going near my sister."

"Uh-oh…"

Irene seemed deadly serious.

Her violent aura prickled his skin. Ayato found his hand reaching for the Lux holder at his waist.

Ayato was already within range of the Gravisheath, and the roof limited his room to run. He couldn't escape it.

Then—

"Irene… You don't really mean that, do you?" Priscilla inserted herself between Irene and Ayato and stared at her sister coolly. Soft as her volume was, anger and determination unmistakably darkened her tone.

All at once, light returned to Irene's eyes, and she hurriedly

disengaged the Gravisheath. “O-okay! Kidding! I was just kidding, calm down!” In a cold sweat, Irene held out both palms and shook her head.

“Are you sure? You’re not going to do anything to Mr. Amagiri?”

“Nope! Not a thing!”

“Really? Promise?”

“Yeah, yup! I promise!”

“Okay. Good.” Priscilla smiled brightly and nodded in satisfaction.

Irene, meanwhile, wearily slumped her shoulders, but then raised her head to look at Ayato. “But I’ve got two questions for *you*.”

“Irene?” Priscilla warned.

“Just asking! I’m *just* asking! I’m not gonna do anything to him! That’s okay, right?”

“Hmmm…” As Priscilla regarded Irene with suspicion, Ayato chuckled uncomfortably.

“It’s okay,” he told Priscilla, then turned to Irene. “What do you want to ask?”

“First. The dudes lying around down there. Did you do that?”

“Do…what?” Ayato didn’t understand the question, so he had to return it with one of his own.

Irene stared straight into his eyes for a good bit, then let out a sigh. “Fine, never mind. The second question: Priscilla says you came this way by coincidence. But what were you doing in the back alleys?”

“I was just…” Ayato suddenly remembered the reason he was there in the first place. “Oh, that’s right!”

He hurriedly took out his mobile and placed a call to Saya. After a few rings, an air-window opened to show his friend’s face.

“Are you okay, Saya? Where are you now?”

“I’m okay. The problem was solved just a little while ago.”

“Oh, Ayato. I’m glad you called. I found Saya.” Kirin poked her head into the frame with a relieved smile on her face.

“Oh, that’s good.” Ayato put his hand to his chest, his mind at ease.

So Kirin had gotten to Saya before she caused any trouble.

“And where are you, *Ayato?”* Saya asked.

“I don’t think I’m very far from you, actually… Kirin, do you want to meet at that same corner? …Okay. See you.”

Ayato finished the call and put away his mobile. Irene and Priscilla stared at him, bewildered.

“That’s all… I was looking for a friend of mine who got lost,” he explained.

“I *told* you, Irene,” Priscilla gloated.

Irene stood abashedly scratching her head, then finally let out a long breath and dropped her shoulders. “*Tch.* All right, I guess I owe you one.”

“Don’t worry about it. We all have to help each other out when things get tough.”

Ayato was completely sincere, but Irene shook her head, exasperated. “It’s not that easy… I gotta pay you back sooner rather than later, or it’ll get weird.”

At Ayato’s and Priscilla’s empty expressions, Irene heaved another sigh. Taking out her mobile, she showed them an air-

window.

It displayed a tournament bracket.

“Oh, right. They must have announced the matchups for the main tournament.” Ayato reflexively searched for his own name, and when he read the bracket, his jaw fell open.

Phoenix—Round Four.

In the space for Julis and Ayato’s opponents, along with the school crest of Le Wolfe Black Institute, were the names *Irene Urzaiz* and *Priscilla Urzaiz*.

CHAPTER 6
POWER AND ITS COST

“T-t-t-t-trouble, Mr. President!”

Pale with worry, Korona Kashimaru dashed into the office of the student council president—until her legs tangled, and she fell flat on her face.

The Le Wolfe office was located in the deepest part of its central school building. It had no windows nor decorations of any kind. It was, however, far from poorly furnished. There were no more pieces than necessary, but each one was massive, both imposing and elegant.

“…What is it?” Dirk, seated in a chair that swallowed his frame, did not even look at Korona, making only a token response as he went through the electronic paperwork in front of him.

“W-well, this is rather sudden, but Miss Urzaiz says she would like a word with you…,” Korona told him, rubbing the bruised end of her nose.

Just as the words were out of her mouth, the office door blew off its hinges with a tremendous blast. She yelped in terror.

“Hey, Dirk. Sorry to bother ya.”

Korona gingerly turned to see Irene standing in the doorway, gripping the Gravisheath and wearing a dauntless smile on her face.

Beyond Irene, Korona saw the security detail in a pile on the floor.

Whimpering, Korona managed to crawl to where Dirk sat and hid behind him.

“Irene, I’m busier than I look. I don’t see people without an appointment.” Dirk glanced up from the documents, at least, but

otherwise sat completely unfazed.

"Is that right? Then let's make this quick." Just then, Irene nonchalantly struck with the Gravisheath.

Dirk's desk split in two, and Korona jumped up, yelping.

Dirk did not even raise an eyebrow. "What are you trying to do?"

"I oughta be asking you that. I thought you were a guy to keep promises, if nothing else."

"That's right. I always keep my promises. If I didn't, I'd be in a cemetery by now."

"You've got some balls, telling me that!" An evil bloodthirsty aura rose from Irene's body, and the Gravisheath growled.

But in the next instant, she sprang back, crouching, and glanced cautiously around the room.

She clicked her tongue. "You've got Cats here, too?!"

"Unlike you, I'm a fragile ordinary civilian. It's only natural I take precautions."

"Cats" was a codename for students belonging to Grimalkin, an organization that undertook covert activities at the direct orders of the student council. Korona had never seen a Cat; she did not even know how the organization functioned. All she knew was that they were divided into Silver Eyes, who operated within the school, and Gold Eyes, who focused on intelligence gathering and operations outside the school.

Her knees buckling with fear, Korona tried to spot them—but she saw no one other than Dirk and Irene. There was really nowhere in this room to hide in the first place.

Still, Irene seemed to sense their presence, and remained warily still, braced for combat.

"Well, let's hear why you think I broke my promise," Dirk said from his seat.

"Priscilla was attacked today. Don't pretend like you didn't know."

"Oh, that," Dirk said casually, as if remembering some trivial event. "You don't suspect me, do you? Anyway, wasn't it the idiots from Rotlicht? That's something you started."

"Yeah, I did. But Priscilla's protection was included in our contract. You gonna tell me you forgot that part?!"

"Of course I didn't," Dirk replied. "*My* people know not to attack you or your sister, and I told them to teach a lesson to the

guys who attacked you the other day. But there are those in our school who still refuse to obey me. You know that."

"Then why d'you let them do whatever they want? Just take care of 'em already." Having reined in her temper a bit, Irene flopped onto the sofa while still glaring at Dirk.

"Even idiots can be useful."

"Useful…? Fine, whatever. Still, Dirk, I thought that the Cats were supposed to be with Priscilla when I'm not around. What the hell were they doing?!"

"Yes, I've assigned Cats to her. I guess they were a little late this time," Dirk said with a bored sniff.

"A little *late*…?" The menacing glow shone again in Irene's eyes.

"She's a regenerative anyway. So what if she gets a little roughed up?"

Slowly, silently, keeping her head down, Irene rose and easily hefted the Gravisheath.

The purple scythe rattled in her hands. It sounded to Korona like the weapon was cackling.

"…*Die*." Her voice was emotionless, inorganic.

But the scythe came down in a stroke swift enough to cleave the wind.

Its point whizzed toward Dirk's throat with pinpoint precision. At the very last instant, however, it changed direction, as if blocked by an invisible wall.

Still, the blade grazed Dirk's face, leaving a red streak on his cheek.

Irene took a step back to prepare for the next attack. Head still bowed, she readied the Gravisheath again.

"Hmph. That thing's gotten quite a hold on you…" Dirk scowled—as he often did—then brusquely raised his voice. "Hey, Irene. Who'll suffer the most when I'm gone?"

At that, Irene snapped her head up with a tiny gasp, as if regaining consciousness. The purple phosphorescence of the Gravisheath weakened faintly.

"Yes, the Cats were a little late in this instance, but they made it to the scene in time. They just couldn't come out into the open because that brat from Seidoukan got himself involved. They can't be seen. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure. But the fact is: He's the one who saved her."

“All right, then, what do you want me to do?” Dirk said carelessly, leaning back in his chair until it creaked.

“Now it’s hard for me to fight him,” Irene spat. “I’m gonna set things straight on my end. And I don’t wanna hear any whining from you.”

“Do whatever you want.” Irritated, Dirk shooed her away like a stray dog.

“Hmph. Sorry to bother ya,” Irene said curtly, and left the room.

As soon as she had, the atmosphere relaxed, and Korona let out a long sigh. “That was scary.”

Her relief was short-lived. Dirk’s harsh voice came like a barb in her ear. “Hey, Korona. What time is it?”

Korona stood up in a rush and quickly checked the clock. “Uh, um—It’s just past six PM, sir!”

“I guess that works. Read my fortune.”

“Huh? R-right now?” Korona looked at Dirk with surprise. “Shouldn’t we clean up first…?”

Thanks to Irene, the office was a mess. The desk was broken in two, the rug was in tatters, and the sofa was flipped over. The scene was far from reassuring.

Dirk didn’t appear to care. “Don’t make me repeat myself,” he snapped.

“Y-yes, sir! Sorry, sir! I’ll prepare it right away!” Korona took out a deck of Tarot cards from the inside pocket of her uniform and spread them on the floor.

“And what would you like me to augur?” she asked timidly.

Dirk loomed over her with crossed arms and answered bluntly, “Same as always. Whatever you see.”

“Okay…” Perplexed, Korona began to shuffle the cards.

Fortune-telling was one of her many hobbies. She had no formal training, and her style was mostly self-taught. Despite her enthusiasm for it, her fortunes rarely came true—well, almost never. Still, around this time every day, Dirk ordered her to read the cards.

That was fine with Korona, but the problem was that Dirk never told her *what he wanted her to look for*. Normally, one made readings based on some kind of request, so the lack of direction always gave Korona trouble.

“Oh—It seems like a waste to let this chance go by, so how

about I predict how the Urzaiz sisters will fare in the Phoenix!" Korona clapped her hands at her own brilliant idea.

After fretting for a while, she would usually decide on trivial things like the night's dinner menu or the next day's weather. But today, there happened to be a perfect subject.

"Okay. I'll begin…" Korona closed her eyes and began to rearrange the cards, feeling for them by touch.

As she did so, a blue-white magic circle formed around her, drawing in an enormous amount of mana.

Korona herself was unaware of this, selecting and flipping five cards with her eyes shut.

"Done!" As soon as she finished turning the cards over, the magic circle disappeared.

"Let's see. The Fool upright, and the Sun inverted, and…" She read the flipped cards one by one, then brightly looked up to Dirk. "This is great, Mr. President! The cards say that Miss Urzaiz and her sister will win it all!"

"Hmph. I bet," Dirk muttered, as if that outcome was obvious, then motioned with his hand. "Korona, get me one of the vice presidents. It doesn't matter who. You can go home for the day after that."

"Uh, sure. Got it." Korona quickly put away her Tarot cards and left the president's office with a bow.

Dirk ran Le Wolfe's student council more like a dictatorship. It consisted of three vice presidents and several clerks. They helped him with his work in ways that more resembled secretarial jobs than Korona's role did. She really just handled errands and odd jobs.

"The president sure does like fortune-telling," Korona murmured as she headed to the council room crammed with student officials.

Meanwhile, Dirk sat alone in the president's office, arms crossed and deep in thought.

Korona's fortune was clear. The result would be inevitable. He had to do something.

"Guess I have to be ready," he muttered, and took out a black mobile device from the wrecked executive desk.

The device belonged to Dirk, yet it did not. The only one allowed to use it was the president of the Le Wolfe Black Institute

student council.

Dirk tapped something into it. No air-windows opened; this communication would be by voice only.

"Get me Number Seven of the Gold Eyes," he said tersely.

After a moment's pause, a quiet gloomy voice answered.

*

"…She asked you to dinner? Don't tell me you accepted?"

"Well, yes."

Julis stared at Ayato in utter disbelief, then collapsed on the floor of the training room, head in her hands. "You're unbelievable…"

Unable to form the words to finish her sentence, she was left literally speechless.

Ayato might have anticipated this response. He didn't try to make any excuses.

Julis remained curled up for a little while, then finally stood and shook her head. "No, it's all right. If I'm going to be around you, I have to get used to things like this. Fine. I got myself into it." She smiled tightly. "Now, explain to me again exactly what happened. One thing at a time."

"Um, well, so yesterday I saw Priscilla getting attacked. Then, when I helped her out, Irene wanted to attack me. Then, we cleared up the misunderstanding, and Priscilla insisted she wanted to repay me somehow…" Ayato counted each step on his fingers.

"And you knew at that point," Julis asked, "that those two were our opponents for the next match?"

"Yeah. Irene told me."

"And you still accepted their invitation?"

"Um, I wasn't sure if I should, either, but I couldn't just turn them down." Ayato scratched his cheek. "I mean, we might be enemies in the Festa, but not outside of that…"

"You're too soft!" Julis shouted, pinning him with an angry scowl. "I don't need to remind you of Silas Norman. This city is a pit of nasty cutthroat competition. There are countless students who would frame or deceive others for their own ends. What if it's a trap?"

"I-I'm sure it's fine. They don't seem like bad people… Well,

Irene might be a little scary, I guess."

"That's why I'm telling you you're too soft. The world would be a simple place if every schemer looked like a bad person. Don't trust people so easily."

What she was saying sounded reasonable enough to Ayato. But still… "Then what about you, Julis?" he asked.

"What?"

"We're teaming up for the Phoenix, but if we fought in the Lindvolus, we'd be enemies. Would I have to be suspicious of you, too?"

Ayato had no intention of participating in the Lindvolus. His only reason for fighting now was to help Julis, so his question was purely hypothetical.

She flinched at the curveball question. "Er… Well…"

To bring that up was a little unfair, but effective.

Julis faltered, looking conflicted, and finally gave a long, resigned sigh. "Fine. Do as you like… But on one condition!"

"Condition?"

Julis jabbed a finger at him and declared, "I'm joining you at the table."

*

The next evening, they headed to the address Priscilla had given Ayato—an apartment in the residential district.

The building was not quite a luxury apartment complex, but it was clean, stylish, and neat.

"I was wondering which restaurant they invited you to," Julis said. "Why their apartment?"

"I have no idea." Ayato was just as surprised as his partner. He couldn't say what this was about.

"Maybe it really is a trap…"

Julis trailed behind, distrustful, as Ayato headed to the indicated apartment.

The door opened, and an apron-clad Priscilla greeted them with a broad smile.

"Welcome! Oh, you must be Miss Riessfeld. I'm so sorry I couldn't introduce myself the other day."

"Oh, um, no—Me too…"

“Please come in! Dinner will be ready soon.”

While Priscilla’s hospitality disarmed Julis, the pair entered to find a dining table in a tidy living room. Irene sat morosely at the table. Naturally, she was not wearing her uniform. She was dressed down in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

“Hey.” Irene offered them a glance and a curt greeting, then quickly looked away. She’d been against inviting Ayato to begin with, so her attitude was understandable.

Her behavior was in extreme contrast to Priscilla’s, but that in itself seemed to set Julis at ease.

Her usual confidence returning to her face, Julis sat across the table from Irene.

“Some welcome, Lamilexia. That’s how you greet us after inviting us over?”

“I don’t remember inviting *you*, Witch of the Resplendent Flames.”

“Well, this exceptionally good-natured boy is my partner. I can’t have him getting in trouble. So here I am.”

Irene smirked. “Ooh, such a worrywart. What, are you Amagiri’s mom?”

“Excuse me? His *mother*?!”

Julis and Irene went on bickering, but oddly enough, there was little animosity between the two. They both seemed to have a grasp of the boundaries.

Maybe they are actually getting along in their own way, Ayato thought, taking a seat next to Julis.

Just then, Priscilla brought their dinner. “Sorry to keep you waiting!”

She laid out numerous dishes piled onto small plates. Ayato thought they must be appetizers.

“A chickpea and tomato salad, potatoes with aioli, shrimp sautéed with garlic and hot peppers, and ajillo mushrooms.”

“Ooh, now we’re talkin’!” With a grin that Ayato had never seen on her face before, Irene quickly reached for the food, only for Priscilla to slap her hand away.

“Irene! Mind your manners.”

“Aww. Come on, what’s the big deal?”

“It *is* a big deal! This dinner is to show our thanks to Mr. Amagiri, and if you start eating first—Hey!”

“*Bone-appetite* to me!” Ignoring Priscilla’s rebuke, Irene pinched

tidbits from one dish after another.

"Really, Irene?!"

Julis giggled and whispered in Ayato's ear, "Lamilexia is being hospitable in her own way."

"Huh?"

"She's like the royal taster." Julis's shoulders shook with quiet laughter.

"C'mon, dig in. Priscilla's cooking is awesome." Irene continued to stuff her face, leaving no doubts about her healthy appetite.

Priscilla admitted defeat with a sigh and turned to her guests. "Sorry about this."

"No, really, we don't mind," Ayato said. "Well, let's eat."

Although their meal began haphazardly, Irene had not been exaggerating.

"Th-this is really good," Julis murmured in surprise after a bite of mushrooms.

Indeed, every dish was exceptionally delicious. It was not high-end gourmet cuisine, but the flavors had a homey touch, warm and relaxing. Which was not to say bland—each dish had a twist that made it interesting.

"Oh—Thank you," Priscilla said.

"Mhm! Told ya so." Irene proudly puffed out her chest.

"You know I wasn't praising *you*, right?" Julis said in mock exasperation, but it was clear that Irene took enormous joy in compliments directed at her sister.

"So, this might be a weird question at this point, but… Why do you have an apartment?" Ayato finally remembered to ask.

Irene, who was glugging down her drink, replied bluntly, "It's my apartment. I'm usually here. What about it?"

"Usually…? What about your dorm?"

All six schools in Asterisk had dormitories. As a general rule, students were not permitted to live in the actual city.

"It's a privilege for Le Wolfe's Page One students. I mean, obviously it's under the table, but."

"And I stop in sometimes to cook and clean for her," Priscilla said with a wry smile. "Irene almost never goes back to her dorm… But for this, it came in handy. We can't exactly invite you two to Le Wolfe, after all."

"That's a lot of freedom… True to Le Wolfe's style, I suppose," Julis said.

“But why did you get a room out here?” Ayato wondered if the dorms at Le Wolfe made for a poor living situation, but quickly realized he had the wrong idea.

“…The Rotlicht isn’t too far from here. It’s convenient,” Irene said, a little uncomfortably, even as she continued to devour her dinner.

“I see. For your nightlife,” Julis sniped.

Irene scowled further. “It’s not for fun. I need money, so I earn it.”

“Money…?” Julis paused. “Yes, I heard from Ayato—you had some disagreement with an illegal casino.”

“What about it?”

“There are other ways to make money. Why get involved in something so dangerous?”

“Other ways, huh? I’d love for you to tell me about those,” Irene said somewhat self-deprecatingly.

“Why would I need to tell you? Isn’t that the reason you’re fighting in the Phoenix?”

“Oh, right. You came to this city for money, didn’t ya? Witch of the Resplendent Flames.”

“H-how did you know that?!”

“We have pretty decent intelligence.” Irene chuckled at having taken Julis by surprise. “But I’m coming from a different place, with different reasons, you know. Even if I win the Phoenix, they won’t grant my wish. That’s the deal I made.”

“What deal?” Julis said suspiciously.

Irene’s glance strayed to Priscilla.

“Oh, I should check on the oven.” With an awkward smile, Priscilla stood and went to the kitchen.

Once her sister had left, Irene sighed, and her chair creaked as she leaned back. “So, putting things simply, I’m a pawn for Dirk Eberwein, the Le Wolfe Black Institute’s student council president. A while back, I borrowed a huge load of money from him, so he’s already granted my wish. And now I follow his orders to repay him bit by bit.”

“The Devious King …” was all Julis said, looking disgusted.

Ayato had heard the name, too. He knew it belonged to a person with one of the worst reputations in all of Asterisk. Ayato had heard countless bad rumors about the man, but not a single good one.

“According to the deal, I can only fight in the Festa with his permission, and even if I win, I can’t use the reward to pay him back. I guess he wants me as his minion for as long as possible. Nasty piece of work, that guy.” Irene shrugged. “But I don’t wanna work for him forever. So I’m working night after night to pay him back as soon as possible—blood, sweat, and tears.”

“You really owe him that much money?” Ayato remarked.

“I don’t even know how many decades it’d take if I worked an honest job.”

That did sound like quite a sum.

“I see. So the reason you’re in the Phoenix to begin with is Eberwein’s doing,” Julis said. “I take it that you have some other objective besides winning?”

Irene smirked, then looked at Ayato. “Bingo. The order Dirk gave me…was to crush you, Ayato Amagiri.”

“What?!” Julis got to her feet, but Irene showed no signs of hostility.

At least, not yet.

“Why are you telling us?” Ayato asked.

Even if it were true, there was no reason for her to let them know about it.

“I’ve still got my own code of honor, okay. I owe you for saving Priscilla. I’d feel like crap fighting you with that hangin’ over my head. So sit and listen, Witch. I’m not going to attack you here.”

“Why is Eberwein after Ayato?” Still wary, Julis slowly sat back down.

“According to Dirk, he wants to take care of Amagiri now because that Orga Lux of his could be trouble.”

“The Ser Veresta? It *is* a powerful Orga Lux, but why go that far?”

Irene nodded in agreement with Julis’s doubts. “I wonder about that, myself. Dirk is as cold-blooded and low-down and dirty as they come, but he’s not incompetent. Or a coward. If the sword’s got him that concerned, there’s got to be something more to it.” Then she turned to Ayato. “I don’t know what Dirk’s planning, but there’s something I figured out from hearing him talk. I think he’s seen someone else who could use that Orga Lux before.”

At that, Ayato nearly jumped up.

“Which is weird. Looking at the public usage record, no one’s wielded that Orga Lux in more than ten years. So, when and where

did he see it in action…?”

Ayato’s heart was pounding.

This could only mean that Dirk Eberwein knew the person who had last used the Ser Veresta—Ayato’s sister, Haruka Amagiri.

“I thought maybe that had something to do with why he’s after you. Based on that reaction, I’m guessing I was spot-on.”

“Yes—I think so, anyway. Thanks.”

Ayato had come to Asterisk to seek out his own path. His sister had left home willingly, and she must have had her reasons. It wasn’t that he *had* to find her. He had faith in her.

Still… He couldn’t deny that he wanted to find her. Especially now that he had a clue.

“Good. Then we’re even.” Irene looked as if her mind was at ease.

Just then, Priscilla emerged from the kitchen carrying a large iron pan. “Thanks for waiting. This is seafood and mushroom paella.”

Sizzling with a sweet aroma, the dish promised to be absolutely delicious.

“Mhm! Priscilla’s paella is a real masterpiece. You better enjoy it,” Irene said proudly.

Priscilla blushed. “Come on, sis. Hurry up and serve our guests.”

Sis…

Looking at the two of them, Ayato felt an inexpressible emotion well up inside him.

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“Well, I guess we should be going soon,” Ayato said.

“Yes, let’s,” Julis agreed.

Having drunk their after-dinner coffee, the two exchanged glances and stood up.

“Oh, leaving already? You could stay and relax for a bit…”

Priscilla tried to detain them, but Irene stopped her.

“Cut it out, Priscilla. No matter how cozy we get, we’re gonna fight them tomorrow. We both got what we wanted to do out of the way. So this is enough.”

“But—”

“Sorry, it’s nothing personal,” Irene said to Ayato, “but I’m still working for Dirk. So now that we’ve repaid you, we’ll be going all out to beat you to a pulp tomorrow. If you don’t like that, you can just back out.”

“Don’t go too hard on me,” Ayato replied, trying to smile, and started to leave.

“Oh, please let me walk you out…!” Priscilla trotted after him, and Irene made no effort to stop her.

“Thanks for dinner, Priscilla,” he said. “It was delicious.”

“Oh, it was nothing. Um… I’m sorry about my sister.” Chagrinned, Priscilla was about to bow in apology, but Julis gently held her back.

“No, I can understand the position Lamilexia is in. We’re going to give it our best tomorrow, too. I hope you don’t think too badly of us.”

“Oh… I see,” Priscilla said, crestfallen.

“You don’t really like fighting, do you, Priscilla?” Ayato asked.

That would be natural for an ordinary student, but for a student in Asterisk—and especially one at Le Wolfe—it made her an anomaly.

There was no denying that an apron suited Priscilla’s personality much more than a weapon.

The sort of ordinary girl one could find almost anywhere—that was the real Priscilla Urzaiz.

What would bring such a girl to the Phoenix stage…?

“My sister is fighting for me. It would be wrong to run away from that.”

“Even if she drinks your blood?” Julis said bluntly.

Ayato was still reeling from that little detail.

Priscilla shook her head. “That’s nothing. Irene’s protected me all my life. I’m happy that I can help her. It’s just…” She trailed off.

“Just what?” Ayato prompted.

“…When Irene uses the Gravisheath, she scares me.” Priscilla’s voice was barely audible. “At first, I thought it was because she wasn’t used to the weapon, but…when she’s using that thing, she’s so savage. Like she’s a different person. And lately, it keeps getting worse…”

She went on, murmuring to herself, then looked up with a gasp.

“I’m so sorry! Oh, I’m talking nonsense…,” she apologized, frantically waving her hands.

They'd made it to the foyer, so Ayato and Julis parted ways with their host.

"See you," Ayato said, waving to Priscilla as she bowed politely. He and Julis left the apartment building.

They walked through the lamplit streets in the night. "What do you think, Julis?" Ayato ventured after a bit.

"About the Gravisheath? I don't know. It seems to me like Lamilexia is plenty savage on her own, so I can't tell the difference —Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for them?"

"I'm not—Well, I am, but that's not what I mean."

Seeing Ayato sulk, Julis shrugged with an awkward smile.

"I'm only kidding," she told him. "I know what you're trying to say—But the fact is, there's nothing we can do."

"…Yeah." She was right.

"We have our own battles to fight. We have to concentrate on that first."

*

"My goodness, Ayato. What do you need at this time of night?"

After he'd returned to his room, Ayato had called Claudia's mobile. The air-window opened after a long pause.

Eishirou had been gone for several days on summer vacation, so Ayato had their room to himself.

"Sorry to call you so suddenly, Claudia. I just wanted to ask you something."

"You do? I'm glad to hear it. Well, what might it be?"

"It's about Orga Luxes."

Claudia's serene face tightened ever so slightly. *"I see. Then it would be best if we met in person. I'd like to tell you I could meet you now, but unfortunately my schedule is still full. I won't be free until quite late—Is that all right?"*

"Sure, whatever works for you."

"In that case…let's meet at midnight tonight, in my room."

"Uh… Um, all right."

Ayato would rather avoid sneaking into the girls' dormitory, but he was in no position to be picky.

"By the way, Claudia… Are you feeling okay?"

"Hmm? Why do you ask?"

"You look a little tired, that's all."

Her smile was as tranquil as ever, but missing a bit of her usual verve.

Claudia raised her eyebrows, genuinely surprised—a rarity for her. *"Why, that's…perceptive of you."*

"Oh, no, I just had a feeling."

She laughed softly. *"Then again, I'm not sure you really are that observant. But I suppose you do pay some attention to me."* The thought seemed to lift her spirits. *"I've just been swamped with work, but I'm all right. I appreciate your concern. I'll see you later."*

After the air-window closed, Ayato checked the time. The analog clock pointed to nine.

"She's working so late… Student council president isn't an easy job, huh?"

The match was tomorrow, and Ayato wanted to rest. But there was no guarantee that he would be able to get ahold of Claudia before then.

"I hope I'm just overthinking things," he muttered to himself and glanced out the window. The moon hung fat and eerily red in the sky.

No matter how many times Ayato snuck into the girls' dormitory at night, he could never get used to it.

Sweating nervously, he managed to climb up to Claudia's room and knock on her window.

It appeared to be unlocked, but there was no response—just like the last time.

He could hardly stay there with his back pinned to the wall of the building forever, so he let himself in to find a few faint bright spots floating in the shadowy room. Several air-windows had been left open.

Straining his eyes, he could see Claudia asleep facedown on the desk. There was an almost mystical beauty to the way the pale light of the air-windows illuminated her figure.

The sight captivated him for a moment, but soon Ayato noticed that there was something wrong. The expression on her face was strangely intense for ordinary sleep.

Her brows were tightly drawn, and painful moans escaped intermittently from her rosy lips.

Is she having a nightmare…?

He ought to wake her anyway. Just as Ayato opened his mouth to address her, two silver streaks of light cut through the darkness to attack him.

It was sheer luck that he had an instant to avoid them. In his normal state he was hardly able to evade a strike like that. With his power sealed, the brief span of time it took for Claudia's Orga Lux to activate and draw out its blades had saved him.

"Claudia…?" Ayato called to her as he backed up against the windowsill, still unable to grasp the situation.

Making no reply, Claudia stood up like a ghost and readied the uncanny twin blades she held with her dangling arms—the Pan-Dora.

Moonlight coming in from the window revealed her figure, but her head was down, hiding the expression on her face.

"H-hey, wait! Claudia!"

She sprang into action as if on cue.

Her strides appeared slow, but in the next moment she was already upon him. Ayato released his power for a split second to dodge the blades striking from both directions.

—Or so he thought.

"Augh!"

The blades he had meant to elude drew crescents through the air and swung inches from his face. It was as if they had anticipated his movements.

He twisted away from the second attack with only a hair's breadth to spare, but he lost his balance and fell on his back. Never pausing in her fluid motion, Claudia climbed astride him and silently raised the two swords above him.

"Claudia!"

Calling her name for the third time, Ayato reached out in desperation. His fingers barely, just barely, grazed her cheek.

Her body convulsed once, and her upraised arms snapped to a halt.

"Aya…to?"

For a few moments, Claudia only stared emptily down at Ayato. Then she came to with a gasp and leaped off him.

"I-I'm so sorry, Ayato! I…"

Surprise and regret covered her face, but most of all, terrible distress. Ayato had never witnessed such an open emotional display from her before.

But at least his life was no longer in danger. His hand went to his chest in relief.

Meanwhile, Claudia returned the Pan-Dora to standby mode and stood with her back to Ayato. Shoulders heaving, she slowly forced her own breathing back in order.

"I truly am sorry. I must have let my guard down." When she turned toward him to speak, Claudia had returned to her usual self. She gave him a deep, contrite bow.

"You sure scared me. What in the world was that?" Ayato asked as he got to his feet, trying and not quite succeeding to make a pleasant expression.

That was putting it lightly. To be honest, he had seldom been more terrified. Claudia's technique was keen and impeccably precise, and even bore comparison with Kirin's. Of course, Kirin's skills were more polished, but Claudia was no ordinary fighter—That much was certain.

"Let's see, now—Where should I begin…?" Claudia made a show of being deep in thought but soon smiled as if she had all the answers. "Very well. Now is as good a time as any to tell you. And

what I'm about to say might not be irrelevant to the questions you have."

"What do you mean?" Ayato cocked his head quizzically.

Claudia motioned for him to take a seat on the sofa while she returned to the chair at her desk. "But first, will you hear a request of mine?"

"A request?"

Claudia's eyes looked at Ayato straight on. "It's not for a while yet, but I would like you to fight as a member of my team in the Gryps tournament next year."

"The Gryps…?" He was more than a little surprised at the unexpected appeal, but he knew his answer. "Okay. But only if Julis fights with us."

Ayato had promised to help Julis. And Julis's goal was a grand slam. He obviously couldn't help her in the individual Lindvolus, but he fully intended to fight alongside her at the Gryps unless she told him otherwise.

"I thought you might say that. But I have to say, I'm a little jealous." Claudia's smile seemed forlorn. "But that's not a problem. I was planning on recruiting Julis, as well. I don't think she would refuse."

As long as Julis's sights were set on a grand slam, strong teammates were a must. The chances of her declining Claudia's invitation would be low.

Ayato got the feeling that Claudia already had a specific plan in mind. "And what does what happened just now have to do with the Gryps?"

"Just that I wouldn't mind sharing secrets with a teammate," Claudia said, then activated the Pan-Dora once again.

Thanks to the earlier incident, Ayato couldn't help recoiling.

"Please don't worry," Claudia said with a gentle laugh. "I won't do it again. By the way, Ayato—Have you ever *experienced death*?"

"Huh…?" Ayato was bewildered. "Um… I don't understand what you mean by the question."

"I meant exactly what I said."

"Well, if I had died, I wouldn't be here, would I?" He was not a zombie, after all.

"I've already died over twelve hundred times."

"What?" Ayato could only stare at her baffled, again.

Amused by his bewilderment, Claudia hefted the Pan-Dora for

him. “The cost that this darling demands of the wielder is to experience one’s own death. Every time I fall asleep, I dream of my inevitable demise.”

“Experience your own death…?”

She said it casually enough, but it sounded to Ayato like horrific torture.

“Now, it never shows you the same death twice—My little one’s mischievous that way. I’m amazed at all the different ways a person can die. Illness, accident, starvation, cold, suicide, and of course—death by the hands of another. All of these I could face one day.” Claudia still spoke like the Claudia he knew, calm and kind. “Just now, I was about to be killed. I must have attacked you while I was dreaming. Again, I’m sorry.”

She bowed her head again and went on.

“When I wake, the substance of the dream melts away. All that’s left are fragments and impressions, the fear and pain I felt on the verge of death, and—how can I describe it—a bone-deep fatigue. And that is why, despite its extraordinary power of precognition, no one had been able to wield this one. I’m told that those who tried to use it before me didn’t last three days.”

Her laughter tinkled like a bell, but her words could not have been more ghastly.

“…I’m amazed you’re okay,” Ayato said.

“Yes, well—Sometimes there are occurrences like what happened tonight, but I can adapt.”

“Still…” Thinking back to her tortured face as she slept, he found it hard to believe her.

“Hmm, are you worried about me? How sweet of you.”

She was teasing him, but Ayato responded seriously, “Why wouldn’t I be?”

That embarrassed her a bit. “I believe I mentioned it before, but I do have a wish,” she said demurely. “To make it come true, I must use this weapon.”

“Then, what is your wish, Claudia?”

“That…will have to remain a secret.” She slowly shook her head.

All who come to this city have a wish. They fight to make their wish come true, and they seek strength to fight for it.

Maybe it was all perfectly normal, Ayato thought. And yet…

“Now, back to the subject at hand,” Claudia said. “The stronger

the Orga Lux, the steeper the cost tends to be. Your Ser Veresta, too, requires so much prana that normal Genestella would dry up using it. It's rare for anyone to score a high compatibility rating to begin with. You could say that the difficulty of wielding it is a part of its cost."

She paused for a moment. Her smile and voice were entirely back to normal.

"Of course, every Orga Lux is different," she continued, "so it's not easy to make general statements. But isn't this along the lines of what you wanted to discuss?"

She had seen right through him. Well then, that made it easier to get to the point.

So he asked her directly, "Claudia, what do you think of the Gravisheath?"

"I don't know any more about it beyond the data I gave you."

"I'm not asking for data—I'm asking for your opinion. As an Orga Lux user." He paused, then grumbled, "You know that."

She laughed silently. "Well… As you know, Orga Luxes have wills of their own. Do you understand what that means?"

"Huh? Umm… Well…" Ayato pondered for a bit, but none of his answers sounded quite right to him.

He gave up, raising his palms in resignation.

"It's the same as people," Claudia said brightly. "If they have wills, that means they have personalities, and if they have personalities, they can be put into categories."

"Categories…?"

"I mean that there are Orga Luxes with good personalities and those with bad ones."

"I see." So, just like people.

"Well, there are other ways of putting it. For example, whether they're friendly toward humans or not."

"Then, going off that, which do you think the Ser Veresta is?"

"He—Oh, forgive me. It might be *she*. In any case, I think yours has a relatively good personality. Even if it is a little contrary."

"And what about the Pan-Dora?"

"Oh, this one has the worst personality. Perhaps even as bad as mine." Claudia giggled merrily with her hand to her mouth.

Typical Claudia, talking about herself that way.

"Then…how about the Gravisheath?" Ayato said.

"That one…" She lowered her gaze a bit. "I don't want to speak

ill of others' darlings, but the Gravisheath strikes me as dangerous."

"You think so, too?"

That Orga Lux was dangerous—not because of its power but, to use Claudia's words, because of its personality.

"I've never faced it, so this is only my impression, but that one seemed very selfish. That kind of Orga Lux often tampers with its user."

"Tampers…?"

"Hmm… It might be misleading to say it *takes over*, but some Orga Luxes can transform the mind and personality of the wielder to their liking. The longer they use it, the more marked the effect becomes. And *that* one already has the power to physically transform the user."

Ayato let out a long breath and raised his eyes to the ceiling. *So that must be it.*

"Thanks, Claudia," he said. "That's helpful."

"Don't mention it. But why are you in such a hurry?"

"Our match is tomorrow. I have to get some rest."

"Oh…" Claudia's expression turned seductive as she made an unmistakable invitation. "You'd be welcome to spend the night."

"Um, I—I think I'll pass!" Ayato jumped up and dashed to the window.

Then, with his foot on the windowsill, he turned back. "Oh, right. About my sister—The student council president of Le Wolfe seems to know something."

"Dirk Eberwein?" Claudia asked, sounding surprised.

"I think he might have met her."

"I see. I'll look into it."

"Okay. Thanks." With a wave, Ayato opened the window.

"Good luck tomorrow," she called after him.

He smiled and leaped out into the night.

CHAPTER 7
THE GRAVISHEATH

Power is necessary to protect, and to gain something requires even more strength.

Those without it inevitably lose what they treasure.

And to recover something lost demands the greatest power of all.

These were Irene Urzaiz's guiding principles.

In southern Europe, there was a small country where the integrated enterprise foundations vied viciously for power, where the political situation was constantly unstable and seemed to sink a little deeper into the mud with each passing day. In that country, there was a town like an abandoned ruin—Irene's hometown.

In an age of extreme centralization, when the population was concentrated in metropolises, people who lived in towns like hers were almost invariably poor. Under the rule of the integrated enterprise foundations, the system necessitated trapping a certain number of people in poverty. The predicament of Irene's family was not uncommon.

A Genestella child born to such a family was considered a blessing. Although the discrimination against Genestella was even more pronounced farther from the cities, for the poor they were a source of money. The best outcome was to be scouted by, and perform well for, one of the Asterisk schools. But whether working for a private military company, police force, or, in the worst case, a crime syndicate, Genestella were always in demand.

Irene sensed from an early age that her parents had high

expectations for her. She did not hate them for it, but she did not feel affection for them, either. Her sister Priscilla, also a Genestella, was the only one she cared for.

Where Irene saw herself as rough and vulgar, her sister was kind and innocent and, above all, adored her.

For Irene, her little sister was the only person she could love, and the only one who could return that love unconditionally.

One day, her sister was badly injured. She was in the wrong place when an old building collapsed.

It was a structure from a previous century, abandoned since the Invertia. Most places like it were barely standing, and known to be unsafe. But for the poor who had nowhere better to live, they were the only shelter.

Even most Genestella would have died from injuries like that, but Priscilla had fully recovered by the following day. That was when Irene realized her sister was a regenerative.

Every nation required examinations of Genestella to determine their talents. But in their country, governmental institutions were not entirely functional and hardly existed outside the cities. Those with unregistered abilities were not rare.

But *they* were always searching.

"See, Priscilla? These nice people want your help. You'll go with them, won't you?"

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the scouts from Frauenlob—Allekant's people—came for her.

Her mother sweet-talked her sister with a hand on her shoulder, her father signed the contract with an air of satisfaction, and the contract itself bound her through a "special commitment scholarship" to the notorious Allekant Academy as a student stripped of any right to protest no matter what they suffered. A specimen.

The next day, Irene left home with her sister.

She didn't quite believe they could escape, and she didn't know where to go.

All she knew was that if they didn't run, she would lose her sister. That was the one reality she could not accept.

“Hey. You Irene Urzaiz?”

It was three days after they had run away from home that the man found them in the abandoned house where they had taken shelter.

He had dull rusty hair and was short and chubby. His expression was contorted with ill humor, drawing attention to the bright gleam in his eyes.

She wondered if Allekant had sent him, but that did not seem to be the case. The school crest the man wore—the crossed swords—told her that much.

“Here, use this,” he said, and tossed Irene a Lux activator.

As Irene cautiously touched it, a piercing shock shot through her body.

In that instant, she understood. This was *power*.

The Lux activated, and a giant scythe materialized in a purple phosphorescent glow. Energy filled her body, intense and brutal.

The man looked on, raised his eyebrows slightly, then spoke again. “Hmph, so you pass. All right. Tell me your wish.”

Irene did not understand the situation, or who the man in front of her was. But she answered without hesitation. She had only one wish in the world.

And she would sell her soul to the devil to make it come true.

The man’s expression did not change. He took out his mobile, made some kind of deal, and after a little while told her bluntly, “I just bought your sister back. Didn’t come cheap, but you can work it off.”

Once he was finished, he turned to walk away.

He suddenly paused mid-stride, and his head turned on his stocky neck so he could give the sisters a parting glare. “Just remember this. It wasn’t Le Wolfe who saved you. It was me. So you won’t be working for Le Wolfe, just me. Got it?”

Thinking back on it now, all that had happened was that their destination changed from Allekant to Le Wolfe. It didn’t fix anything.

Still, Dirk had given Irene the time and opportunity—and most importantly, the *power*—necessary to get Priscilla back.

That was enough.

“…Sis? It’s time to go.”

Irene opened her eyes to see Priscilla examining her with some

concern.

They were in their Sirius Dome waiting room. She checked the time to find that, yes, they needed to head to the stage.

"All right. Whaddaya say we take care of some business?" Irene rose from the sofa and gently patted Priscilla's hair. "You don't need to worry. Just do everything like we always do."

"Okay…"

Irene was the one who took orders from Dirk. Priscilla knew nothing and heard nothing. She simply provided her blood for Irene when necessary.

That's how it should be, Irene thought. She was the only one who needed to dirty her hands. Those things were not for Priscilla.

That was the way they'd always done things, and it would never change.

"Still, those two are gonna be tough customers. We better give them all we got as soon as it starts." With that, Irene activated the Gravisheath.

Priscilla took the cue and offered her neck.

An irresistible urge swelled inside Irene, and without another word, she plunged her fangs into her sister's pale neck.

As a fragile whimper escaped Priscilla's lips, the warm metallic flavor flowed down Irene's throat.

I wonder when this taste became so delectable.

The Gravisheath pulsed in joy, as if to agree.

They stood like that for a full minute.

Irene released her mouth and gently caressed the small but deep wound. It disappeared before her eyes.

"Thanks, as always."

Priscilla shook her head slowly in response. "No, this is nothing. But…"

She looked down, and Irene wrapped her arms tightly around her.

Priscilla whispered inside Irene's embrace, "I'm sorry, sis."

"You dummy. What're you apologizing for?"

Every job that she finished drew Priscilla closer to her.

Dirk was not a man to be trusted, but he never broke his promises. And so right now, she had no choice but to fight.

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“Well, it’s about time.”

Ayato looked up at Julis’s voice. “Oh, right. It is.”

“What’s wrong? It’s not good to think too much before a match.” Julis set her hand on her hip and frowned.

With a weak smile, Ayato waved her concerns away. “No, it’s nothing. Let’s go.”

“Hmm… If you say so.” Julis wanted more, but after checking the clock, she let out a short sigh. They headed out of the waiting room.

“Ayato.” Julis led the way, her shoes clacking, without turning to look at him.

“Yeah?”

“I have to win. No matter who my opponent is, I have no intention of yielding. That’s why I’m here.”

“…I know.”

“But I’m not particular about *how* we win.”

The passageway leading to the stage seemed short, yet long.

Her voice echoed faintly back to him. “If we can win by fighting the way you want to, then let’s do it. We’re partners. We work together and fight side by side. Isn’t that the way it should be?”

“Julis…” Ayato paused and looked at her.

She also halted a few paces in front of him.

He bowed his head to her. “Thank you.”

“Silly. There’s nothing to thank me for.” Julis turned around ever so slightly with pink-tinged cheeks. “So? What do you have in mind?”

“Well, there’s something I want to try. I’m not sure if it’ll work, though…”

As Ayato outlined his plan, Julis raised her eyebrows. “Hmm… It’s not unprecedented, but this is the Gravisheath we’re talking about.”

“I know it won’t be easy,” he went on, bracing himself. “But still—”

“All right,” she sighed, but with an encouraging smile. “Try it. But you’ll probably only get one shot. If you fail, you’ll have to give up the idea.”

“I won’t have a choice.”

“As long as you’re aware of that. Good—Let’s go.” She gently extended her closed fist.

Ayato nodded then lightly bumped his fist against hers.

"Well, well, Round Four's been a string of thrilling battles in every stadium! The contestants for the finale here at the Sirius Dome will be Team Amagiri-Riessfeld of Seidoukan Academy versus the Urzaiz sisters of Le Wolfe Black Institute! Which team will advance to the Sweet Sixteen?!"

"I've been looking forward to this fight. Both teams made it through the preliminaries without giving their opponents a chance, so I think we're about to see a watershed moment."

"Now, Ms. Tram, would you share your thoughts on how this one could pan out? Irene Urzaiz's Gravisheath consumes a lot of energy—Does that give Seidoukan's team an edge in a prolonged fight?"

"I wouldn't say it's that cut-and-dried, ya know. Priscilla allows Irene to refuel, so to speak. And in terms of raw ability…"

"Hmph. They always think they know what they're talking about." Julis frowned at the commentary.

With Ayato's time limit, they would be the ones at a disadvantage in an extended fight.

And from here until the final match, there would be only one day for rest. If Ayato broke his seal for long periods, it would make the next fight harder—That was obvious.

Still…

"Ayato, don't push yourself too hard," Julis told him. "Well, not that you'll listen."

"We can't win otherwise. Not against them."

Julis activated the Aspera Spina and nodded. "I have to agree. Let's give them all we've got as soon as it begins."

Ayato returned her nod, took a few steady breaths, and charged up his prana.

Magic circles surrounded him and shattered with sparks of mana. Power and the pain accompanying it welled deep inside and surged through his body.

"By the sword within me, I break free of this prison of stars and unchain my power!"

Then the shackles broke away, and he was filled with strength.

"There it is! Amagiri's signature entrance—known and loved by now!"

"Quite a show no matter how many times you see it."

The audience erupted in excitement and cheers.

“All fired up, huh, Amagiri.” The Gravisheath resting on her shoulder, Irene pursed her lips into a thin smile. She advanced, while Priscilla waited in the back. “Well, I better keep the pace!”

The Gravisheath gave off a purple light, its mana writhing eerily.

Tension drew the air in the dome taut, and—

“Phoenix, Round Four, Match Eleven— Begin!”

The automatic announcement declared the start of the match.

Julis immediately cast a spell. “Burst into bloom—*Livingston Daisy!*”

Flames flared up all around her to swirl into crimson chakrams. The fire surged toward Irene from every direction.

“Ha! Isn’t that cute!” There were more than a dozen fiery projectiles, but the Gravisheath easily swept them away.

In that time, however, Ayato had closed the distance. With the Ser Veresta in hand, he dashed between the chakrams and swung up from below.

“Ooh—I don’t think so.” Irene absorbed the attack with the Gravisheath, and sparks flew as the two blades clashed.

Even for the Ser Veresta—the sword that could burn through anything—it would not be easy to compete with another Orga Lux. Ayato could see that by locking weapons, he could force his opponent back bit by bit, but that by itself presented no significant advantage.

Ayato had expected this result. He switched tactics, twisting to pull her in as he swiped at Irene’s torso.

She deflected the strike upward with the Gravisheath and immediately followed with a downward swing, but Ayato was one step ahead with a counterattack. She dodged the sweeping blow by spinning to where he had just been, but Ayato retorted with a thrust.

Irene twirled the Gravisheath in front of her to use its blade as a shield. Sparks danced again as Ayato drew his blade back, twisted his wrist, and deflected the scythe backward.

“Huh?!”

He swung the Ser Veresta down at Irene’s defenseless chest—at her school crest.

She leaped backward to just barely dodge the attack, but her trademark scarf did not escape. Two pieces of fabric fell to the ground in flames. “Damn. Didn’t think I’d be this outmatched…! Guess I can’t beat you in a swordfight!”

Ready for her evasive maneuvers, the scorching chakrams continued to bombard Irene.

“Diez Fanega!” Irene cried. With one swing of the Gravisheath, black spheres of gravity appeared around her, flying into the chakrams. The magic projectiles destroyed one another.

“Wh-what an amazing exchange to open this match!” Mico gushed. *“The teamwork between Amagiri and Riessfeld there was something to see, but so was the elder Urzaiz’s defensive skill!”*

“*Takes some guts for him to jump into the middle of those flames*,” Pham chimed in. *“Riessfeld has always had tremendous control, but that’s not an act you can pull off without a lot of faith in your partner, so.”*

Ayato and Irene reestablished their distance, and Julis prepared for her next move farther off.

“Not bad for fighting together all of one or two months,” Irene said as her panting calmed.

“And you managed to dodge it all by yourself,” Julis replied, her Aspera Spina at the ready.

“By myself? Ha! We’ve got two on our team, too!” A savage glow lit Irene’s eyes, and she grinned to expose her fangs. “This strength is mine *and* Priscilla’s!”

The Gravisheath rattled as a violet light spread across the stage floor. The sound was almost like cackling laughter…

“Ayato, jump!” Julis shouted.

Even before her warning, Ayato’s legs were carrying him into the air.

He could see the atmosphere shivering around where he had just been standing—where Irene had manipulated the gravitational field.

“Heh. Pretty good reflexes,” she remarked.

“Well, I have seen that a few times,” Ayato replied, cautiously lowering his stance while readying the Ser Veresta.

The Gravisheath’s power affected a targeted area, but there was a moment’s lag before the ability took effect. Whereas ordinary students stood no chance, Ayato could narrowly dodge it with his power released.

“But do you really think you have the Gravisheath all figured out?” In Irene’s hands, the weapon cackled again.

The violet glow spread again across the ground, but over a much larger area than before.

Ayato took a wide sideways leap, but seeing he could not escape entirely, he braced himself for the weight to come.

Instead of being crushed, however, his body floated gently in the air. “Huh—?”

“It takes a lot of work to strengthen gravity, but not so much to weaken it,” Irene said. “I can manage a pretty broad target this way.”

Ayato hovered some six or seven feet above the ground.

He tried moving his arms and legs, but even a Genestella couldn’t do much without having something to push off against. His flailing limbs waded powerlessly through the air and his body spun around.

“Ayato!” Julis started toward him.

“You stay right there!” As Irene swung the Gravisheath toward her, Julis felt the weight.

“Ngh…!” She rolled to the ground. She tried to stand, but she could not even bring up one knee.

The target area was small enough that Julis could have dodged it, but Irene had accurately predicted that she would rush to Ayato’s aid.

“I’m not as precise as the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, but I’m good enough when my target can’t move. Massive destruction—*Uno Fanega!*”

A single gravity sphere appeared in front of Irene, and she steadied her aim at Ayato.

Until she abruptly fell on one knee.

“Damn—I guess using three abilities at once is a bit of a stretch…! I fueled up a ton, but I’m already out.” Irene’s face contorted in pain, although her power still remained active.

“Oh, well—This is the end, Amagiri!”

The sphere shot toward Ayato, and just before the moment of impact—

“Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis!*”

Julis had cast from her position on the ground, and her fireball struck Ayato before the gravity sphere.

“What the—?!” Irene exclaimed as Ayato grunted in pain.

A small explosion sent him hurtling through the air. He hit the ground tumbling, but quickly got up and frowned reproachfully at Julis. “I’m glad you saved me, but couldn’t you think of a nicer way?”

“Better than nothing, isn’t it?” Julis shot back. “Besides, I made it as soft as I could. It couldn’t have hurt that much, with the amount of prana you have.” She spoke easily, with the power of the Gravisheath apparently weakening.

Meanwhile, Irene inched her way backward, keeping her eyes trained on Ayato and Julis. She was trying to reach Priscilla to draw more blood.

“Julis!” shouted Ayato.

“I know! Burst into bloom—*Longiflorum!*” Julis swung her rapier to draw a spear of flame in the air.

Now was their chance, when Irene could not use the Gravisheath. Julis did not intend to let it slip past.

As the fiery spear cut through the air, Ayato chased behind it. But then—

“*Orreaga Pesado*!”

A purple wall—or rather, a row of pillars resembling prison bars—sprang up from the ground to block them both.

Ayato almost instantly came to a dead stop.

The prison bars apparently had the same power as the gravity spheres, only elongated in shape.

“A fixed defensive maneuver—!” Julis bit her lip in frustration. And then Irene reached Priscilla.

“Heh. That’s a trick I keep up my sleeve just in case someone tries to attack my sister. You won’t get through it too easily.” On the other side of the bars, Irene smiled thinly and made a show of sinking her fangs into Priscilla’s neck.

The Ser Veresta could break through, but it was already too late.

“So we’re back to square one,” Ayato sighed, then checked the time to see that almost two minutes had passed since the start of the match.

Ideally, he wanted to finish the match in another minute or so…

“Ayato!” Julis called to him sharply.

“What is it?”

Ayato went to her, and she whispered quickly in his ear. “I’m

done setting up on my end. If you want to take your shot, now's the time."

"Got it." He nodded and tightened his grip on the Ser Veresta.

The next move was Julis's ace in the hole. Whether it succeeded or failed would determine the outcome of the match.

And given the time, Ayato had only a few chances left.

He recalled Julis's words from before the match. *"If we can win by fighting the way you want to, then let's do it."*

Ayato knew it was a gamble. But he had to make his move before Julis used hers.

"Sorry for the wait. So, another round?" The purple bars melted away, and Irene stepped forward wiping her mouth. Behind her, Priscilla lay limp on the ground, breathing hard.

Ayato's brows drew together, more sad than angry. "Do you really think what you're doing is right?"

"Shut up, Amagiri. I don't need you lecturing me to know."

"Then why—?"

"I *said* shut up!" Irene held the Gravisheath high as the violet glow raced across the ground.

Frustrated with the non-answer, Ayato took a large leap backward to escape her ability. The target area was even larger this time, but he was getting the hang of dodging.

"You pesky…!" she growled.

I guess we'll have to show her, Ayato thought. Determined, he positioned himself with the Ser Veresta at his side.

"Burst into bloom—*Primrose!*" Julis came in for backup.

"Ugh, enough already! *Cien Güestia!*" The Gravisheath flashed, and an aurora of purple rippled outward, annihilating every one of the fiery primroses.

But that instant was enough for Ayato to run around from the right and jump in through Irene's guard. "Amagiri Shinmei Style, First Technique: *Twin Serpents*!"

After a sidelong slash, he stepped in to slice upward.

Irene hissed. The powerful clash of impact and a residual flash tore through the air.

She had just managed to block the attacks with the Gravisheath, but was caught off balance. Seizing his chance, Ayato swung the Ser Veresta not at her—but at her Orga Lux.

"What?!" Irene shouted.

The Ser Veresta was a sizeable weapon, not suited to fine

maneuvers, but the same was true of the Gravisheath. Ayato struck with all his might into the mechanism containing the urm-manadite, and while the purple light absorbed most of the blow, he definitely hit *something*.

The Gravisheath shrieked, high and terrible. When he moved in for another blow, an invisible force knocked him back. *"Guh—!"*

It must have been the Gravisheath. Ayato fell back into stance and looked up to see Irene's rage-filled eyes glaring at him.

"Oh, I get it now. Didn't think you'd come after the Gravisheath…!"

All along, Ayato's goal had been to break the scythe.

Destroying an Orga Lux was no simple feat, but not impossible with another Orga Lux of equal power.

If he had succeeded, the match would be all but decided. But now that his intent was known, he would not get a second chance.

"It was a good idea, Ayato, but we're out of time," Julis called to him, looking serious.

"I know." It was the best strategy Ayato could come up with, but it had failed. He nodded to Julis and shifted his tactics.

"You guys have a lot of tricks up your sleeve, huh? Well, now it's my turn!" As if it, too, were burning with anger, the purple glow from the Gravisheath in Irene's hands intensified. "*Diez Mil Fanega*!"

The scythe's blade carved through the air, summoning spheres of gravity. They were smaller than before, perhaps the size of a fist —but the extraordinary thing was their number.

"You've got to be kidding…," muttered Julis, her expression taut with disbelief.

Several dozen spheres multiplied in front of their eyes—no, more than a hundred.

"Like I said, my control isn't great," Irene admitted. "But there's no way to miss with these!"

"Julis! Don't worry about me! Concentrate on defending yourself! And—"

"Yes, I know!"

As Julis confirmed her next move, Ayato held the Ser Veresta out in front of him.

"I'm gonna demolish you!" Irene brought the Gravisheath down, and the orbs of magic rushed at Ayato.

About one tenth of them were headed for Julis.

That was to be expected, considering Irene's intent. Ayato was

confident that Julis could defend herself.

He inhaled deeply and focused his mind. He *imaged* a small circle around himself, and concentrated his consciousness inside it. This was his ring of impenetrable defense.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique: *Yatagarasu*."

The spheres flew at him furiously, but he sliced each one in half the moment it entered his circle.

With lightning-fast strokes, Ayato hacked away the barrage of spheres one by one, never missing. The audience probably couldn't follow the path of his sword, or even the motion of his arms.

"Are you for real…?" As the orbs dwindled before her eyes, Irene's face contorted in shock.

Once he had destroyed more than half of the spheres, Ayato went on the offensive. He dashed between the attacking orbs and lunged straight in front of Irene.

"Dammit!" Irene reacted immediately to meet him with the Gravisheath.

The two Orga Luxes collided, and sparks sprayed. Ayato and Irene, their weapons locked, strained against each other, back and forth, until finally Irene leaped backward as the Ser Veresta pushed her away.

"Julis!" Ayato shouted.

"You got it!" replied Julis, who had been evading the gravity attack on her end.

A magic circle materialized directly under Irene where she had landed.

That was Julis's trap, a fixed ability. "Blossom—*Gloriosa!*"

Giant flaming claws erupted from the stage to crush Irene in their grasp.

"You're too obvious!" Irene scoffed, as if she'd seen through it all along. She drove the Gravisheath into the ground, and the fiery glow of magic vanished. The claws of fire, too, wavered and dissipated like a mirage in the summer heat.

The maneuver had clearly failed. But that was quite all right. "There's no harm in being obvious…especially as a decoy," Julis said.

"What…?!" Shock came over Irene's face as another magic circle appeared at her feet.

Although, "at her feet" was not entirely accurate. The second circle was at least ten times larger than the first with a diameter of

well over twenty yards.

"This is the hottest of all my traps," Julis crowed. "I hope you enjoy it!"

As the Aspera Spina descended, the circle shone bright red. The enormous amount of mana flowing into it was palpable.

"Aw, hell!" Irene started to run—but too late.

"Blossom—*Rafflesia!*"

In that instant, a fiery flower of unbelievable proportions rose up, and an ear-piercing roar engulfed the stage. The explosive gust raged like a hurricane and carried the roasting heat to Ayato, far away as he was. The shock wave obliterated the remaining spheres of gravity.

It was a destructive force beyond comprehension.

Julis had warned Ayato that because of the amount of prana involved, this move required significant time to prepare. Throughout the fight, even while she provided backup for Ayato, Julis had been readying this trap in secret.

"S-sis!" Her face ashen, Priscilla tried to reach her sister, but she couldn't see through the haze of smoke.

When faced with life-threatening danger, Genestella would instinctively concentrate all their prana on defense, and they did not easily suffer critical injuries. Even so, it was hard to imagine Irene or the Gravisheath emerging from that unscathed.

But—

"You can't be serious!" Julis gasped.

A crater had been carved out of the stage. In its center, Irene stood with her face down, the Gravisheath dangling from her hands. Her clothes were burnt all over, but she did not seem to be badly hurt.

And an enormous sphere of gravity surrounded her, protecting her.

"Did she use the Gravisheath to suppress the explosion…? She shouldn't have had that much energy left…," Julis murmured, stunned.

Ayato was thinking the same. The power Irene had demonstrated was not enough to suppress that destructive attack. Even if she could, it would have cost her her life.

Does that mean she wasn't fighting at full strength before? No, that can't be right…

"Oh, sis! You're okay!" Priscilla's face lit up as she ran toward

her sister, but Irene remained motionless with her head downcast.

An unpleasant thought arose in Ayato's mind. The Ser Veresta quivered in his hand, like a person shuddering.

"S-sis—?" Priscilla must have sensed that something was wrong, too. She stopped a few paces from Irene and stared uneasily, hands clutched at her chest.

And then Irene started to move.

Weak, stumbling steps carried her toward her sister.

Priscilla began to back away, then tripped and fell.

"Oh, no!"

"Hey—Ayato!"

Just as he began to run to help Priscilla, an oppressive heaviness overwhelmed him and Julis.

"Wh-what's happening?!" Julis cried as Ayato gasped out loud.

They were both helplessly pinned with a force that sent cracks through the stage. The pain and pressure would be enough to knock them unconscious if they weakened their focus for even a moment.

It was the gravitational force of the Gravisheath—that much was obvious. But its range and power were incomparable to earlier. The entire stage was engulfed in purple light, and they could not stand or even speak, as if held by the weight of a mountain.

Somehow Ayato managed to turn his head to look at the sisters. Priscilla was limp against Irene's left arm. And in her neck were Irene's fangs.

"*Ngh*—What is going on?!" Julis squeezed the words from her throat.

"I don't think that's Irene. It's the Gravisheath!"

"Wh…at…?!"

While this startled Julis, Ayato trusted his gut feeling.

The Gravisheath had taken over Irene's body. The scythe laughed in its cackling rattle and glowed an ominous violet.

"We have to help Priscilla…!"

Irene kept on drinking Priscilla's blood. Even a regenerative could be drained of life if she kept paying the price for the power of an Orga Lux.

With all his strength, Ayato struggled to his feet and fought his way toward Irene—toward the Gravisheath.

Horrible, dragging pain tore through his body. This was not just the Gravisheath's power, but the fact that his time limit had already passed.

At the most, he estimated, he had another minute. If the seal returned, that would be the end.

No matter how he cajoled or cursed them, his legs could only trudge along, slow and heavy. He only had thirty or forty more feet to go, but it seemed like hundreds of yards.

Still, he couldn't give up now.

The school crests measured vital signs, and they would declare defeat for any contestant who lost consciousness. Since Irene was still in the match, she might still have a shred of consciousness left.

That was Ayato's only hope.

"Irene—!" He forced out his voice when he was less than ten yards from her.

There was no response. The Gravisheath snickered in her hands.

Fifteen feet… almost close enough to strike.

"Wake up, Irene! Don't confuse power for the things you treasure!"

Just a few more steps.

"Irene! You have to take hold of what's important with both hands! Which hand has the thing you want?!"

One moment. For just one moment, light returned to Irene's eyes.

The abnormal gravity vanished, and the purple light dimmed. Calm and quiet descended as if someone had flipped a switch on the world.

But in the next instant, Irene screamed in agony, and a weight even heavier than before crushed Ayato.

Irene stood slack as a doll, the life draining from her body as Ayato looked on. But still her right hand did not let go of the Gravisheath.

Or rather—the Gravisheath did not let go of her. Irene was no longer its wielder, but merely a vessel of fuel. And once it had used her up, it would surely discard her.

Upright with its shaft resting on the ground, the Gravisheath shone ghostly purple and rattled sharply.

It was a malicious laughter, sadistic and gleeful at the desperation of someone robbed of their last ray of hope.

The oppressive weight kept him from moving a single finger, but fierce rage boiled up within Ayato. A pure anger toward someone with no respect for others.

As he clenched his jaw and squeezed the Ser Veresta, the sword

trembled in his hands as if to call back to him. Something inside him connected with the Ser Veresta for the briefest instant.

This is—

He could not describe it in words if he tried, but in that moment Ayato undoubtedly felt it—the will of the Ser Veresta.

And what it expressed—if he were to compare it to a similar human emotion—was revulsion. Something akin to loathing directed at the Gravisheath.

And something else, something it wanted from Ayato… Or rather, a will to test him.

As if it was telling him, "*Do it, if you can.*"

"Didn't I tell you I hate tests…?" Ayato complained, but poured his remaining strength into standing.

The crimson light of the Ser Veresta pierced into the purple-stained world. It gradually grew stronger, eating into the violet like a flame through paper.

The Ser Veresta. The magic blade to burn through everything, against which there is no defense.

If that was true…

With a shout, Ayato strained and sliced through the empty air.

And the purple glow swallowing them was *cleaved in half*.

The Gravisheath froze, and its rattling halted. The aberrant gravitational field was extinguished once again—this time, at its source.

The scythe's power only dispersed for an instant. But that was all Ayato needed.

He leaped into range and struck at the Gravisheath from below to send it flying from Irene's hand.

Fixing his eyes on the scythe as it spun end over end, he sliced up toward it as it arced past. Then he turned his wrists and pierced it, impaling it against the ground.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style Middle Technique: *Carved-Out Shell*."

After a moment's pause, a dissonant screech like scraping glass rang out across the stage.

How many watching the battle would recognize that sound as the dying scream of an Orga Lux?

When the screeching faded, a thousand cracks ran through the

outer layer of the Gravisheath, and it shattered.

A few seconds later, the automated voice announced the end of the match.

"Irene Urzaiz, Priscilla Urzaiz—unconscious. Winners: Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!"

As the loudest cheers yet of the tournament shook the arena, Ayato dropped to the ground, rolled onto his back with his limbs splayed, and let out a soul-deep sigh of relief.

EPILOGUE

When Priscilla's eyelids slowly lifted, the first thing she saw was the person dearest to her.

Seeing her sister's smile, both kind and sad, filled her with relief. At the same time, an out-of-place question entered her mind.

How long had it been? It seemed like forever since Priscilla had seen a true, sincere smile on her sister. Irene had always been a little short-tempered and rough around the edges, but more than that, she had once been a person who smiled all the time.

"What is it? Does something hurt?"

As Irene peered into her face with concern, Priscilla gave a small shake of her head.

She looked around to find that they were in a sickroom—a small, sterile room with white walls and ceilings, with a bed where Priscilla lay.

This was not Le Wolfe's medical ward. So was she in the therapy clinic?

She traced her memory back for a reason she might have landed here and found it immediately.

That's right. Irene started acting strangely during the fight…

She remembered clearly up to that point, but everything after that was foggy.

"Um, why am I…?"

"You ran out of prana. I don't remember much, but I took too much blood from you," her sister said. She suddenly bowed her head, on the verge of tears. "I'm so sorry—!"

"Don't be." Smiling faintly, Priscilla shook her head again.

Things were still vague, but she was sure of one thing—*That* had not been her sister.

It must have been…

“What happened in the match?”

“We lost.”

Priscilla had guessed the answer before asking, and her sister answered plainly.

“Oh…” Irene hadn’t really been fighting of her own volition in the first place, so Priscilla didn’t mind. “What about the Gravisheath?” she asked.

Irene let out an enormous, dispirited sigh. “It broke.”

“Huh…?”

“That stupid Amagiri smashed it to bits.” Irene’s shoulders drooped in a mild show of discontent.

Priscilla was stunned for a moment, then burst out laughing. “Oh, I see. So Amagiri did it…”

She pictured the face of the good-natured young man. She would have to think of some way to thank him. Maybe she could start by cooking him an even more sumptuous dinner than last time.

Then Priscilla worried. “Oh, but—Does that mean you’re in trouble with the student council president…?”

The Gravisheath did not belong to her sister. It had been on loan from Le Wolfe or, more precisely, from the school’s integrated enterprise foundation.

“Nah, here’s the crazy part. He let me off scot-free.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Except I failed to carry out his orders, so the remaining balance doesn’t change. All that work for no pay.” Irene really slumped then, and she sighed.

But even while she complained, she looked as if her mind was clear.

“I got impatient trying to clear the debt… Oh, well.”

Seeing Irene sheepishly scratching her head, Priscilla looked up at her. “You know, sis…,” she began.

“Yeah?”

“I always thought that you should do whatever you think is right. Of course, I’d stop you if you tried to do anything too violent or cruel, but I know that you’ve always looked out for me more than anything.”

That was how Priscilla had always felt.

She had tried to do the best she could without getting in her sister’s way. She had believed that was best for both of them.

Irene must have felt the same way. Because she was kind at heart, she must have assumed that she alone should fight, and she alone should bear the burden.

But that was no longer enough, Priscilla thought. At least, not to survive in this city.

It wasn't enough to simply receive protection, nor to simply protect.

She had to reach out to take the hand that was offered to her, and use her own legs to stand when that hand pulled her up. She had to return an embrace by squeezing back. A relationship could not be equal otherwise.

"But now…I want to be strong," Priscilla said. "If you're going to fight, sis, I want to fight with you. I don't want to stand behind you. I want to stand with you."

"Priscilla…"

"You can't talk me out of it. And someday, I'm going to be stronger than you."

Her sister looked at her with surprise, but showed her white teeth in a grin—joyful, and open, and unburdened. "Ha-ha! All right, *that* I gotta see."

For the first time in a while, Priscilla saw Irene smile like Irene.

*

In the office of the student council president, an air-screen displayed the end of the day's match. It was not a live broadcast, but a recording.

Ayato's Ser Veresta completely shattered Irene's Gravisheath, and victory was declared for Ayato and Julis.

Dirk wore his usual sneer of naked disgust as he watched the scene. "Hmph. Well, that's about what I could've expected," he muttered to no one in particular and looked away.

While he had failed to destroy Ayato Amagiri, his efforts were not entirely fruitless. He should have been satisfied with that.

The loss of the Gravisheath was an unexpected consequence. But since they had managed to retrieve its urm-manadite core, that would not pose a significant problem. And they could expect it to behave itself better in the future.

He still had uses for Irene and Priscilla. And the connection

they'd made with Ayato Amagiri was an unforeseen boon that dramatically increased the breadth of his options.

But most intriguing of all, there was *this*.

Dirk looked again at the air-window, which showed Ayato lying on his back, writhing in unmistakable agony.

"What's happening down there? Amagiri seems unable to get back up! Miss Tram, does this mean he took a lot of damage?"

"Hmm, I dunno. But that mana definitely looks like—"

As she spoke, magic rings surrounded Ayato and spewed out chains that wrapped around his body. Then, with one intense flare of light, the circles all vanished, leaving Ayato limp and motionless.

"Huh? What happened?"

"Amagiri's prana was incredible before, but now it's dropped drastically. Now this is just a guess, but maybe that opening ritual of his isn't for show at all…"

Dirk turned off the air-screen and snorted derisively.

He had heard the rumors, but now it was beyond question. Ayato Amagiri could only maintain his strength for a fixed period of time.

Those at the other schools had probably reached the same conclusion by now. But where they might still harbor some doubts, Dirk had none whatsoever—because he had previously seen for himself the very power that shackled Ayato at the end of the match.

In any case, once that secret became well-known, it would be more than a little tough for Ayato and Julis to advance in the tournament. They would hit a brick wall sooner rather than later.

"Was I too hasty, mobilizing the Cats…?" he wondered.

The Cats had not finished the task he had assigned, and it wasn't too late to redirect them to a different mission.

But Dirk shook his head and banished his second-guessing. "No. He's *her* brother. No telling what he's capable of."

Indeed, Ayato had—though only for a short time—unleashed a glimpse of the Ser Veresta's true power. Dirk was skeptical as to whether Ayato could ever wield its full strength, but it didn't hurt to be careful.

He kicked up his short legs to rest atop the newly ordered executive desk and sighed heavily.

Dirk's plans resembled a spider's web, with countless interweaving schemes spread out in every direction. If one failed, another one somewhere else would yield some kind of gain.

This was why Dirk never lost. He never had, and probably never would.

"If there's one cause for concern, it's that brat from Jie Long. It all depends on how much she tries to meddle… And I better have a chat with that Allekant girl…"

Grumbling and muttering, the Devious King absorbed himself in his complex schemes.

*

"A-are you okay, Ayato?" Kirin flew into the prep room in distress and looked anxiously down at him as he lay on the sofa.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fi—*ngh*!"

Ayato, with a damp towel on his head, tried to sit up, but winced at a stab of pain.

"…You don't look fine." Saya poked her head out from behind Kirin, also a bit worried.

"Of course he doesn't, after being that reckless. He went nearly a minute over his limit," Julis said with a sigh, changing the towel on his head.

The cool sensation felt indescribably good against his overheated body.

"So, our secret is out," Julis remarked. "Very, very out."

Even though they'd skipped the winners' interview, by now everyone would know that Ayato had some kind of limitation to his strength.

But, in a sense, that was inevitable. The secret was going to get out sooner or later. It had just happened sooner than planned.

The real problem was…

"We have to think of tomorrow's match." Claudia, who had also come to check in on Ayato, pulled no punches.

"Exactly." Rubbing circles in her temple, Julis let out another grand sigh.

The blowback from breaking the seal for so long was powerful, and now Ayato would be unable to move for nearly a full day. As long as he remained resting, he would heal quickly, and he might be able to fight from the second day on, but…

"We don't have a day to rest before Round Five," Julis went on. "We have to think of something."

“Well, I’ll figure out a way,” Ayato said.

“Oh, *will* you?” She glared at him through narrowed eyes and squeezed his arm.

“Ow—*ow-ow-ow*!”

“I don’t know how you can talk like that in your condition,” Julis said, astounded, after she let go. “‘Optimistic’ doesn’t begin to describe it.”

“I’m not just being optimistic. I know this is serious. But I can’t break my promise.”

“Your promise?”

“I’m going to help you, Julis. That’s what I said, and I plan to do it. But I can’t, in this state. So I’ll figure out a way.”

“Wha—?!” A blush came into her face. Flustered, she turned away from him. “Y-you fool! What are you talking about…?!”

Saya and Kirin jumped in on the scene.

“…Okay. Then I’ll help Ayato recover faster,” Saya said.

“I’ll do whatever you need! I’ll make rice balls!” Kirin added.

“Excuse me! *You* two can worry about your own match!”

As Ayato regarded the three with a pained smile, he suddenly noticed Claudia beside him. Her expression was as soothing as always.

“If you can make it through tomorrow, you’ll have a day off before the semifinals. You can get your rest then. But…”

“Yeah. I know.”

Even if he survived tomorrow, the same thing would happen again and again. That would not solve the problem.

Ayato exhaled slowly and closed his eyes.

It was time to deal with these bonds that had been placed on him.

And that meant he had to deal with his sister’s disappearance.

AFTERWORD

Hello. Yuu Miyazaki here.

Here we are with Volume 3 of *The Asterisk War* now in stores. To all of you supporting this series, I'm truly grateful.

Well, I recall, after the last volume, writing about how many more characters there were. I added even more in this volume. And there are still more to come as the story goes on. But all these personalities are necessary to move the story of Asterisk forward, so please pardon the population.

The Phoenix Tournament finally got underway in this volume, and I got to shine the spotlight onto some of the other schools that really hadn't had their turn yet. The story will revolve around this Festa event for a little while longer, so there'll be even more chances for the other schools to take the stage. You can count on it!

Once again, we have a wealth of mesmerizing illustrations from okiura. I was especially blown away by Claudia on the front cover. She's just too beautiful! Really amazing! I also asked okiura to head the character design for Irene and the others. I just can't bow my head low enough to him.

And the manga version of *The Asterisk War*, by Ningen, will start its serial run in earnest soon. In fact, the spells in this volume that Julis casts were reverse-imported from Ningen's work. I'm one of those people who can still recite Lina Inverse's Dragon Slave spell from memory, so this stuff makes my heart sing. I never want to stop being that kind of nerd!

Last but not least, I want to thank all the people who helped me with this work.

To my managing editor, Mr. Iwaasa—I'm so thankful for everything you do. And to Shimizu, the rest of the editorial staff, and the staff at the bookstores that hosted my book signings, thank you so much. And thank you most of all to the readers supporting me!

Looking forward to seeing you again in the next volume.

Yuu Miyazaki
April 2013

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